



# Research on the Menstrual Culture in Canada from the Symbolism and Feminism Perspectives

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**Abstract.** Menstruation is a recent topic around the influence of this particular period that most biological females need to experience in more than half of life. Although there are many studies of menstruation in biology and medicine, there are few studies based on the perspective of sociology, especially in Canada. As a developed country, Canada has already introduced laws about menstruation, but there are still social issues around menstruation for females. This study discusses the sociological influence of menstruation on feminism and symbolism. This study reviews recent research on the field of menstrual culture in sociology and mainly focuses on sociological studies in Canada. The stigma of menstruation deteriorates the mystery of menstruation and causes feelings of shame and fear among biological females. Some females do not know how they should behave during menstruation, and some males are biased toward menstruation because of insufficient education on it. Society's labels for menstruation are often negative and treat menstruation as a tool for human breeding, which leads females to self-objectify themselves. Canada has introduced the Excise Tax Act; nevertheless, the sanitation supplies for menstruation are still expensive, causing period poverty.

**Keywords:** feminism, symbolism, menstruation, sociology

## 1 Introduction

As a cisgender woman whose biological identification is female, my body has to go through menstruation every month of my life. Menstrual culture exists when humans unite as a group and have a social consciousness. The attitude toward how to treat menstruation is different between people. People could be scared, feel shame, feel happy as a natural gift, or take it as a normal biological phenomenon. Even though the national cultures differ between countries, the core culture about menstruation is similar. Therefore, femininity and masculinity link to the attitude toward menstruation from females and males, even in Canada, which should be more open about menstruation as a developed country. Such as, some people avoid talking about menstruation because they will automatically conjure up images of female's genitals with menstruation. Some females would feel angry, shame, and embarrassed when they saw other females holding the

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sanitary pad in their hands in a public place. The period of poverty caused by the expensive prices of menstrual products is as crucial as menstrual shame and stigma. Although there are people who think menstruation is unmentionable, it has many symbols and meanings to ponder as well. In sociological literature, there are only a few studies discussing menstruation, especially about menstrual culture in Canada. However, people should pay attention to the social phenomenon of menstruation to improve the benefit and education of Canadians. Thus, the sociological perspective on menstrual culture in Canada is important to be studied for the benefit of women in this society.

Menstruation, known as a period, is a biological phenomenon that happens to most females. Females experience discharging of blood and other secretions produced by the body due to menstruation. Many moms would tell their daughters that menstruation is a symbol that present they are able to give birth, which sounds like a positive label. However, the impact of more negative labels follows menstruation as well. Many female Canadians bear the influence of menstruation their whole life, which mainly focuses on social problems because of the symbolization, feminism, and reification, in general socialization, of the term menstruation.

On average, in Canada, females spent upward of six years in their life in menstruation, and 70% of them reported that they missed work, school, and social activities in their lifetime <sup>[1]</sup>. Even in North America, menstruation is still overwhelmingly related to shame and being shrouded by society <sup>[1]</sup>. In Canada, 58% of young females feel shameful about discussing menstruation <sup>[2]</sup>. It could relate to the symbolization of negative labels to menstruation. Femininity would link to taboo and social norms about menstruation in Canada, which is the feminization of menstruation as a culture. Menstrual shame reflects the lower social status of females compared to males <sup>[3]</sup>. Reification includes self-objectification and materialization from Canadian society. Self-objectification links to the fact that some females use medicine to suppress their menstruation against inconvenience brought by menstruation. Some females believe in social norms of menstruation, which reflect more self-objectification of females <sup>[4]</sup>. Materialization means people sell menstrual products as a commodity that can earn huge profits from females, which causes period poverty. Period poverty shows the unreasonably expensive price of menstrual products that made women need to spend thousands of dollars or more in life, which males did not need to spend. In Canada, 25% of female Canadians reported that they were experiencing period poverty <sup>[5]</sup>. In general, the socialization of menstruation caused the menstrual culture in Canada to take sociological perspectives instead of treating it only as a physical phenomenon.

The Canadian government amended the Excise Tax Act. It removed the "tampon tax", which means people in Canada are no longer being charged GST and HST for female sanitary products since the law that the government introduced and implemented on July 7th, 2015. Although it seems like Canadians are aware of the issue around menstruation in Canada, the research about menstrual culture in Canada, which talks about sociological perspectives, is still a niche topic that Canadians have done little compared to medical research on it. Hence, it is important to discuss the menstrual culture in Canada from a sociological perspective for the benefit of females and education of Canadian about knowledge of menstruation. The focus of this paper will be biased toward the feminist and symbolic sociological perspective. Symbolism is the understanding of

the relationship and interaction between humans, and this study focuses on the relationship between females with menstruation and this society like the labels society gave to menstruation. In this study, the group that be discussed includes any gender who menstruates, such as transgender males; the term “females” in the paper only refers to the biological sex.

This study focuses on the sociological perspective on menstrual culture in Canada. Therefore, the research questions in this paper discuss how the culture of menstruation impacts this country. For example, the reification, symbolization, and feminism of menstruation exist in Canadian society. The main research question is how Canadian society socializes menstrual culture, such as the relationship between social status and menstruation and the relationship between femininity and menstruation. The first sub-research question is how attributes towards menstruation contributed to the menstrual culture in Canada. This sub-research question means this paper will discuss how Canadian society symbolizes menstruation—the labels that people attach to menstruation, which other word, is the labels given to females. The second sub-research question is the negative consequence, which is period poverty caused by the reification of menstruation in Canada and self-objectification from menstruated females during the period.

## 2 Literature Review of Menstrual Studies

This chapter will discuss sociological research on the symbolism and feminism in Menstrual cultures, which is mainly focusing on the research on Canada. This chapter will describe the culture of menstruation in Canada from three points which are the stigmatization of menstruation, the phenomena of objectification of menstruation, and period poverty.

### 2.1 Stigma and Labels on Menstruation

In Canada, menstruation has always been associated with secrecy and silence <sup>[6]</sup>. Females feel shame when they discuss menstruation and make it sound like an unspeakable secret, which could relate to the lack of education of knowledge of menstruation in Canada. In fact, the gap in menstruation knowledge overshadowed menarche, which is the first start of menstruation in life. Riley et al. argued that people in Canadian society would like to label menstruation the negative and oppressive adjectives, such as mysterious, silent, restricted, and misconceived <sup>[6]</sup>. Those labels caused menstruation-related restrictions, which means the limitation during menstruation from the personal, structural, and social aspects. People restricted menstruation due to the stigma of menstruation, like sin, shame, and danger. Menstruation-related restrictions are the rejection of thinking about menstruation; for example, Canadians defined the topic of menstruation as gossip. Menstruation-related restrictions were associated with a lack of education, negative attitudes, and negative attributes about menstruation. It also shows that Canadians need more communication about menstruation to break the stigmatization instead of stopping discussing menstruation due to the symbolization that menstruation

is dirty, shameful, and unspeakable. Minority groups in Canada, like female soldiers, patients with mental disorders, immigrants, people with low income, LGBTQ2S+, and indigenous people, experienced more restrictions; for example, the stretched sanitary resources for menstruation and not enough female washrooms [6].

People in Canada are still stigmatizing and shaming menstruation, and Canada needs to tackle this social issue, even though Canada is developed. According to the statistics from Always and Plan International Canada, in Canada, 83% of young female Canadians tried to hide that they were in a period [7]. Although females have the right to treat it as personal privacy, the truth is that most women see menstruation as something dirty or shameful and, therefore, unmentionable. The symbolization of menstruation has embodied in the words how people describe menstruation except reproductive, such as dirty, bloody, odorous, peevish, and irritable, which mismatch with the femininity that social norms labelled females in Canada. The social norms surrounding menstruation always seem to be negative and invisible—the conventional norm is that menstruation should be mysterious due to the negative attributes that society gives. If people kept not discuss menstruation, the social issues about menstruation would not be improved, particularly given the high price of menstrual products. Furthermore, it could relate to the increase in period poverty in Canada because the social norms regarding menstruation, such as treating menstruation as a taboo, caused a chain reaction [7]. Hence, breaking the present menstrual social norms and taboo is the first step to improving the menstrual culture in Canada.

Attitudes toward menstruation from Canadians are another worthwhile topic in menstrual culture in Canada. One in two Canadian females felt there was no help from teachers in school or just a little knowledge of menstruation [8]. In the statistics from Plan International Canada in 2019, two in three Canadian females reported that there is no or just a little information about menstruation from social media on the internet [8]. One in two Canadian females reported that they felt not or just a little bit ready for their first menstruation. Those statistics show Canadians lack information and education from public places, and public agencies like schools and social media show a negative attitude toward discussing menstruation. Two in five Canadian females reported that there were people who told them, “You are a woman now”, the first time that they menstruated. One in three Canadian females reported that they are teased by males for menstruating and 57% of Canadian females aged 14-17 were occupied in the group of being teased by males [8]. Less than a quarter of Canadian males aged 14-17 felt comfortable when others were discussing menstruation. The statistics reflect that education in schools is not enough to teach how males respected females’ physical phenomena when they were children. Those data reflected that the social norms in the subconscious of the crowd are negative because people feel embarrassed and shameful when discussing menstruation. Male attitudes impact how females feel about menstruation, like family members and classmates. Therefore, people should mention the attitudes not only of Canadian females but also of Canadian males.

## 2.2 Objectification and Self-objectification

Females started to find some ways to prevent menstruation, such as treating it as an enemy, which is called menstrual suppression. Repta and Clarke argued that half of the Canadian respondents reported suppressing their menstruation during life [9]. Those Vancouver respondents showed that convenience, pain management and positive feeling were the reasons they chose to suppress menstruation. They reported that menstrual suppression is a way to overcome the nuisance, such as having sex at the moment they want. Around 86% of participants who suppressed menstruation reported that menstrual suppression is an aesthetic choice due to the “dirty” and “unclean” body change during the period. In the group that suppressed menstruation, 67% chose the unpleasant physical symptoms as additional motivation. All participants that did not choose suppression reported that menstruation represents healthy and nature [9].

Another research from Granzow showed that femininity, health and embodiment have shifted in relation to the changes in menstrual-suppressing biotechnologies [10]. Canadian females thought menstruation was incompatible with heterosexual intimacy when they chose to suppress it. Menstruation became a symbol of “nature,” and menstrual suppression is an attempt to oblige social taboos. It shows the high socialization of gender expression. Menstruation is highly medicalized in Canada [10].

## 2.3 Period Poverty

Period poverty is the poverty caused by paying expensive costs for menstrual products, which is a significant part of the cost of living. Period poverty also means that people cannot get the menstrual products they need during their period. According to the statistics from Plan International Canada for 2022, four in five respondents who menstruate thought menstrual products were too expensive in Canada. Furthermore, 22% of Canadian females expressed that they cannot afford the fees of menstrual products. The statistic shows that the high price of menstruate products affected vulnerable and minor groups in Canada more than others, for example, 48% of indigenous females and 33% of low-income family whose income is lower than 50,000 dollars [11]. It means that the family with low socioeconomic status experience a more severe period of poverty in Canada. With the high price of menstrual products in Canada, period poverty is an inevitable social issue that cannot be ignored. Period poverty could cause more negative labels on menstruation in females’ sides, which is an interactive consequence of period poverty. People are selling necessities, which as menstrual products, as a tool, can earn money, which is one of the results of reification in menstruation. As one part of the menstrual culture in Canada, period poverty is a social problem to be reckoned with.

Period poverty could be more common during adolescence period. In Nova Scotia, Canada, period poverty became a common public concern in adolescents [12]. The research from Lukindo, Price and Pike showed that of 420 respondents, 40% of them reported that menstruation is the reason that they missed the attendance of school, sports activities, and social activities [12]. More than 50% of respondents reported having difficulties affording menstrual products. One in three respondents reported that, as ado-

lescents, they pay for menstrual products themselves. Embarrassment or shyness became a barrier that stopped them from asking for money to pay for menstrual products for adults. It made that reaction become a vicious circle in period poverty between unaffordability and lack of access to sufficient menstrual products, a decrease in school and activities, and poor menstrual hygiene practices. The collapse of the economy caused by COVID-19 aggravated the period poverty [12].

### 3 Discussion

Stigmatization of menstruation, which makes females strains as individuals defective, is a form of discrimination against females. It represents how Canadian symbolize menstruation as a negative attribute and attach those labels to females who menstruate or not. Menstrual shame is more like a hidden, not a visible stigma because females try to conceal it with great effort [3]. It could relate to the result that Canadian females thought menstruation should be a silent secret [6]. The lack of education on menstruation in Canada is reflected in the ignorance of premenstrual syndrome (PMS), which is diagnosed as a mental disorder. PMS is negative physical and mental symptoms like anxiety, irritability, pain, and depression that happen before and at the start of menstruation [13]. Reification and self-objectification are found in the medical and self-description. The research and treatment of PMS were defined by females' differences as the reification of defects [13]. Society overmedicalized menstruation as an illness which made people feel menstruation is a negative thing [14]. People defined normal females with PMS as mad [15]. Overmedicalization of PMS also made females objectify themselves more because of inconveniences and "unclean" and "not aesthetical" bodies like obesity and acne. This reification further reinforces menstrual stereotypes and leads to negative perceptions of females themselves. Females felt ashamed about their bodies and self-values and believed menstruation broke the ideal of femininity during PMS, which could relate to self-objectification—self-stigmatization [13]. This is why people symbolize menstruation with negative adjectives, which increases Canada's structural and social restrictions. This further shows the need for education and communication in Canada to mitigate the menstrual restrictions made by society and females themselves, as mentioned in Riley et al.'s research. PMS broke the boundaries of femininity, such as females should be in subordinate positions and have low social status. This phenomenon also causes intimacy, especially males, to avoid females before and during menstruation, which makes females refuse to think about menstruation. Furthermore, this further explains why females suppress menstruation, as studies from Repta & Clarke, and Granzow have shown, because people label menstruation as dangerous and sinful due to a lack of hegemonic femininities—like no longer being docile in the period of PMS. Canadian society also objectifies menstruation as a tool and a symbol for giving birth—the reason other females do not want to suppress their period, which seems like a positive label. However, it aggravates the restriction of menstruation because it shows the reification that menstruation is a tool of value, not a biological process and devalues infertile females who cannot menstruate.

Period poverty should be treated as a health crisis in Canada because period poverty causes a vicious circle, as Lukindo et al. showed in the study of Nova Scotia, which could be expanded across Canada. The lack of access to sanitary resources for menstruation caused the absence of social and sports activities, which is the reason for the poor alternatives for menstruation and have raised health issue due to unsanitary substitutes like putting tissues instead of the menstrual pad on the underwear <sup>[12]</sup>. Adolescent females could keep quiet for asking help to access sufficient menstrual products due to they were taught to be reticent about menstruation <sup>[12]</sup>. There are also mental crises due to menstruation's negative attributes from period poverty. It aggravates the negative label of menstruation as it costs too much, which makes females anxious about their living costs and feel guilty about the extra financial cost compared to the males in the family—an improper sense of self-deprecation and delusion. Canadian society still objectifies menstruation as a lucrative commodity, which it is reflected in the price of pads in Ottawa. The prices of the Japanese menstrual pads named KAO slimguar day with G 25 cm are different in each store, which are \$9.99 in T&T supermarket, \$8.99 in Mergi Shop, and \$5.99 in Green Fresh supermarket. Moreover, the online shopping of T&T sells that pad with HST, which reaches up to \$1.30, even though the Canadian government introduced the law of free tax on menstrual products. The phenomenon of the same product with different prices further aggravated the crisis of period poverty caused by the materialization of menstruation. The high price of menstrual products exacerbates the devaluing of menstruation by Canadian Society, which also raises the problem of menstrual restriction. Femininity defines that females should be thrifty and virtuous as a social norm, and the period poverty reinforces the negative idea that females shame themselves for breaking this hegemonic femininity, which worsens females' self-objectification and makes females self-harm.

#### 4 Conclusion

In general, the sociological perspective on menstrual culture in Canada concentrates on the symbolization, feminization, and reification of menstruation. Canadian society symbolized menstruation as the existence of sin and a tool of reproduction, which is both actually negative labels on menstruation. Therefore, the symbolization of menstruation leads Canadian females into a dilemma that this normal biological process is demonized and objectified. The attributes society gave to menstruation are linked to femininity and the barrier to reaching the ideal of femininity in social norms. The attitudes toward PMS could be a classical sample of breaking the hegemonic femininity like meek, thrifty, and aesthetic in most Canadian's views. Those attitudes made females start to self-objectify themselves and be ashamed of themselves because of the negative labels on menstruation, like obese, ugly, deformed, depressed, angry, expensive, bloody, foul, and suppressed. Although attribute like nature or health seems a positive label, in fact, it is a symbol that people treat menstruation as a tool for giving birth. The symbolization of menstruation affects the interaction in Canada. As a negative consequence, menstruation culture in Canada both conform to the maternal component of femininity and conflicts with it. Another vicious consequence could be period poverty,

that Canadian society treats menstrual products as a commodity at a high price. Period poverty made Canadian females avoid thinking positively about menstruation but aggravated the stereotype and prejudice from females or males.

Limitations of this research are that samples from previous studies on menstrual culture in Canada in sociology were small. Instead of only studying the medicine of menstruation, future research should focus on more sociological perspectives for understanding how society regards menstruation to benefit females in Canada against the self-objectification and stigmatization of others from menstrual culture. Free tax on menstrual products is the first step in breaking the Canadian culture of menstruation. More education and communication from public places are required to help people face the harm of menstrual culture in Canada. There should be more research on the sociology of menstrual culture in Canada because the negative culture of menstruation is not just a social issue in backward regions.

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