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VOL. 41 SYMPOSIUM ESSAY: SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF MENSTRUATION

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Subjective Experiences of Menstruation for Trans and Non-Binary Persons and Legal Recourse for Policy Action in India

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Menstruation has been classified as an element of the female discourse that is perceived as a concern for 'women' worldwide. This classification has excluded the experiences of trans and genderqueer individuals who go through menstruation due to their biological identity. Although the UN has declared that the stigma and shame around menstruation have caused harm to women and discrimination against them[1], this article examines the unexplored or unsaid narratives of 'feminine' cycles for trans and genderqueer individuals.

Gender politics play a vital role in defining whose menstruation is discussed and whose experiences are overlooked. From public spaces to comfort rooms, the stigma attached to menstruation and hygiene has always triggered fear in trans and non-binary lives. Existing capitalist structures and advertisements continue to portray menstruation as a woman-centric experience, making it difficult to include representations of trans and non-binary people who menstruate. Gendered stereotypes associated with menstrual products, the use of public spaces, and medicinal-health services contradict with the idea of intersectionality all over the globe. There have also been very few representations of trans and genderqueer individuals who speak about their health and bodies, especially regarding menstruation, from academic and social perspectives.

Certain contestations emerge from the menstrual experiences of trans and non-binary people, their access to menstrual items which are highly gendered and stereotyped in the modern society, including the availability of and access to safe and dignified washrooms and toilets in public places and the need for access to medical services and health support. Lastly, political and legal arenas where regulations defy the ability of persons to self-identify as trans or genderqueer people constrict their bodily experiences around menstruation, leading to gender dysphoria for trans persons during menstruation and other mental health impacts as they deal with this trauma of absence or presence of bleeding.

Through informal discussions, we found trans women in India with aspirations to have their own children experienced despair while talking about menstruation because such surgical procedures are not widely available or affordable in India. Representation and visibility of trans individuals is limited to acceptance by cis-heteronormative, Brahmanical narratives of aesthetic and worthiness.[2] Contrastingly, female-bodied, male-identifying persons dealt with gender dysphoria and are actively using social media to bring to the fore their experiences, generate discussion and an awareness amongst their followers.

There is a need to ensure representation of the trans and genderqueer community in policymaking, peer group discussions and networks with governmental authorities. The complex strands of the personal, social, political, legal and judicial aspects of menstruation among the trans and genderqueer members need further examination and discussion, specifically for the representation and creation of spaces for an inclusive discussion and discourse around their health and bodies, to generate action and awareness in public life using social media and other resources.

While menstruation is in the process of being destigmatized, the limited association of 'bleeding days' with 'women' remains unchanged. There is an urgent need to deconstruct what has been taught at the basic level, so that people can start accepting that menstruation is a biological cycle rather than a gendered cycle.

[1] International Women's Day, 8 March 2019 Women's menstrual health should no longer be a taboo, United Nations Human Rights (Mar. 05, 2019).

[2] Rebello & Stephen, 2021 The Curious Case of Trans* Representation In Media, Feminism in India.

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