

Girls Experience of Menstruation: One Portuguese Reality

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Abstract

Aim: Being a part of an international project, this article intends to provide valuable input regarding menstruation issues such as menstrual perception practices, hygiene awareness, and biological knowledge in socially vulnerable group of Portuguese girls.

Methods: A set of 26 questions organized in four sections were used in semi-structured and in-depth interviews. A sample of 15 young girls contribute with their experience and knowledge regarding menstruation topics. Feelings were also taken into account through nonverbal signs. **Results:** All interviewees were familiar with menstruation, which they identified as something natural and proper to the female body. However, they see it as something to be discussed by menstruators and did not reveal much ease in talking about hygiene. Their knowledge of the female reproductive system physiology was thin. **Conclusions:** This methodology has proved to be very effective in addressing the normal non-subject of menstruation. Data obtained indicated gaps and guided some suggestions to go further in this theme. Also, the responses obtained revealed that this is still a topic of general knowledge but on which we have yet to find strategies to make it more enlightening and open since it is still a target of incomprehension and inequality. To understand menstruation deeply and clearly, every boy and girl has to go beyond dominant preconceptions and not only deepen the physiological knowledge but also sociological.

Keywords: Menstruation; Youth; Menstrual perception; Hygiene awareness.

1. Introduction

Menstrual health and hygiene awareness is an universal problem affecting girls and women all around the world. More than being a biological event, the menstruation also carries latent behaviors, popular beliefs, cultural characteristics and social groups, teasing differentiated restrictions to the ones who experience this phenomenon. Although the countries with high human development index assert that there is nothing inherently undignified about menstruation, the lack of access to menstrual care continues to be a worldwide dominant problem that also affects dignity [1].

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In the Portuguese context, management of menstrual hygiene is overlooked [2]. After a review of the available literature on the topic of menstruation addressing the Portuguese population, it became clear the scarcity of studies conducted on this topic, and even worse as these studies target the youth [3]. The theme appears in the official pages of institutions concerned with the topic, where menstruation health is described in a very technical way and directed to clinicians. Taboos and myths of menstruation over time are also covered. In general, the information available in these sites is poorly visible (confined to the page), unattractive (plain text without interactive tools) and highly uninformative. The topic of intimate feminine hygiene has not received enough attention, neither in the medical literature nor in sites related to femininity, highlighting the need for an educational approach. In addition to this, at school Portuguese curriculum the female and male reproductive system approach is often directed towards the need to avoid unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases [4,5].

Menstruation is important for the fulfilment of girls' and women's rights, a key objective of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) [6,7]. To achieve this goal, especially in vulnerable situations, the need for menstrual awareness, even if only linked to hygienic practices, must be enhanced.

Considering this and bearing in mind the identified flaws for Portugal, research is being done to break the silence on this topic. The level of education, interpersonal relationships, as well as, social and personal behavior of girls were considered indicators to evaluate body knowledge and hygiene awareness.

This article shows one of the insights of the period empowerment network (PEN) Project that is a unique and powerful menstruation education project in empowering youth and building their capacities to continuously learn and raise awareness on menstrual health. Therefore, this article presents a knowledgeable input regarding menstruation issue in teen years, in Portugal [8].

2. Methods

For this article, fifteen Portuguese girls, from Oeiras municipality social intervention neighborhoods, were in-depth interviewed. In-depth interviews involve conducting interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea and are normally carried out face to face where body language is also used to add a high level of understanding to the answers [9]. The number of nonverbal signs were noted. The inclusion criteria were aged above 15 years old; already menstruating; being part of a socially vulnerable group; freely agreed to be interviewed and had provided the informed consents signed by their tutors. To guarantee a proper analysis that systematically went throughout the data, interviews were audio-recorded and after transcript.

Qualitative interview design is a facilitator methodology to establish a personal commitment of both the participant and researcher [10]. Well-structured interviews, apart from immersing the actors into the study, engage participants and ensure meaningful answers. Therefore, this methodology was used to collect data on girl's opinions, thoughts, experiences and feelings. A semi-structured interview was planned with a set of questions and the girls were free to answer it, in their own words. The interviewers were able to probe areas based on the answers obtained or ask supplementary questions for clarification.

The interview guide included 26 questions regarding menstrual experience, grouped in four sections. Section I: eight questions for sample characterization; section II: six questions about menstrual perception practices; section III: six questions concern hygiene awareness and section IV: six questions regarding biological knowledge. Only section I contained closed-ended questions the other sections contained open-ended questions to get more meaningful answers from interviewers since girls had the opportunity to give more feedback. A questionnaire overview can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Set of the Questions that Were Applied During the Interviews, Organized by Sections.

Section I: Sample Characterization	
I.1 Name	I.5 Date of Birth
I.2 Place of Birth	I.6 Parish council
I.3 Academic qualifications	I.7 Student or student worker
I.4 People you live with	I.8 Age at menarche
Section II: Menstrual Perceptions	
II.1 Who gave you the first information about menstruation or where did you get it (school; family; friends; books; internet; doctors...)?	
II.2 Is menstruation a normal spoken issue at home / school / team?	
II.3 At school, does any teacher speak and clearly explains menstruation topic?	
II.4 Do you have any beliefs or different attitudes during the menstrual period? If yes, which ones?	
II.5 Do you know some myths related to menstruation? If yes, which ones?	
II.6 Do you think boys and girls have the same level of knowledge about menstruation?	
Section III: Hygiene Awareness	
III.1 Which sanitary products do you usually use during menstruation?	
III.2 Do you consider those sanitary products expensive? Are they easy to acquire?	
III.3 Do you feel equally clean and healthy when you are menstruating?	
III.4 Do you have any difference in your personal hygiene routines during menstruation?	
III.5 Do you easily manage your menstrual hygiene outside home? If not, why?	
III.6 Do you suggest any improvement for menstruation hygiene process outside home?	
Section IV: Biological Knowledge	
IV.1 What is the physiological purpose of menstruation?	
IV.2 Can you generally describe the female reproductive system?	
IV.3 Do you know the origin of the menstruation blood?	
IV.4 Do you know what the menstrual cycle is?	
IV.5 Do you know the different phases of the menstrual cycle?	
IV.6 Do you know the hormones that controls the menstrual cycle?	

To describe the data obtained in section I, measures of central tendency were implemented. For the remaining sections, a thematic content analysis was performed. Following Blandford et al. [11], the steps for this analysis included: read and re-read the transcripts to get familiar with data; categorize the answers by the different identified sections; search

for patterns across the interviews; check for data coherency in between sections as well as the cross-cutting data from different sections and end with the write-up of the report.

3. Results

The overall key findings are presented by sections. The outcomings obtained from the thematic content analysis are presented. Some of the phrases recorded during the interviews are inside boxes to clarify the conclusions.

Information obtained at the level of body language, such as smiles, looking away, shrugging or other nonverbal signals have been registered and are represented in Fig. 1, according to a color scheme. Its interpretation allows to reinforce which were the sections where it was spoken naturally or where exits more doubts and less at ease.

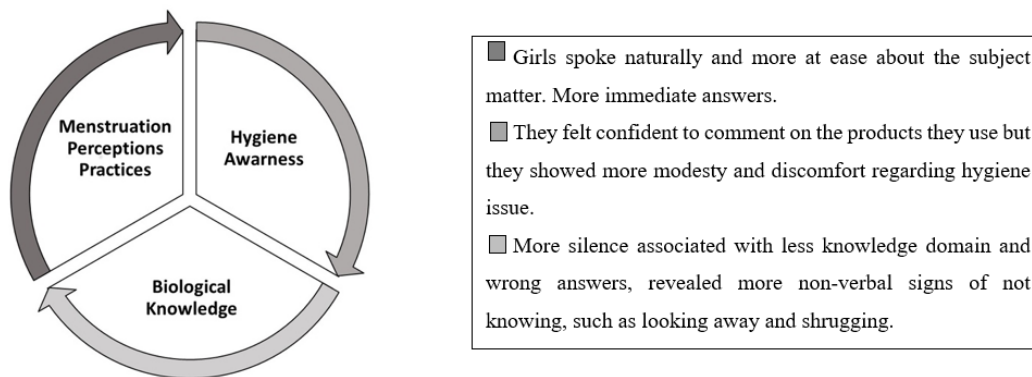


Fig. 1. Description of the nonverbal signals noted by section.

3.1 Section I: Sample characterization

Sample characterization shows a regular and well-integrated girl population, living in Oeiras neighborhood municipality. Although their family origin is Cape Verdean, they all belong to a second generation that was already born in Portugal. Aged between 15-16 years old (average 15,6 years old), all participants are full-time students. Academic qualifications are below expectations for their ages; attending on average two years below that they should for their ages. They live with their families which often include grandparents and uncles. The age at menarche was between 11 and 14 years old (average 12,4 years old).

3.2 Section II: Menstrual perceptions

Our results reveal that the girls first received clarification regarding menstruation from close family members (e.g. older sisters). Further information was acquired at school, where the subject was presented by a nurse that focused on the menstrual cycle, giving special attention to the most probable time where it is possible to get pregnant. Concerning menstrual management, several participants mirror the mechanisms and behavioural adaptations of female family members, who tell them how to proceed when they are menstruating. Moreover, even though the participants view, menstruation as a normal event in their life, the majority agreed that menstrual talk should either be done so privately or only shared between menstruators. Since the girls have a strong tendency to relate menstruation with reproduction and bearing in mind all the previously stated observations, their male family members are often overlooked as the

subject to address this intimate issue with. They mentioned that fathers and brothers don't need to know that the daughter/sister is already menstruating. It was also reported that they don't speak about this topic with other boys as they tend to joke about menstruation. Several taboos were also indicated, but girls said they did not believe or take it very seriously.

"... I just knew that women had this ... when it began on me I didn't get scared ... I just told my sister..." (female, 16)

"... I realised that women are menstruating, at home...." (female, 15)

"Yes ... I'm not ashamed to talk about it... but only with girls..." (female, 16)

"... At school, nurse Rosa talks about period and sexuality..." (female, 16)

"... at home we use sanitary towels..." (female, 16)

"... I use pads. I know where my mum keeps them, and I use ..." (female, 16)

"... if the boys asked if I already had the period, I always said I hadn't ..." (female, 15)

"... with my father and brother nor even think, it is not a matter for them." (female, 15)

"... They (*boys*) know that girls have it but they don't know the rest..." (female, 16)

"... nobody explained to them (*to boys*)..." (female, 15)

"... they (*boys*) just want to know about sex..." (female, 16)

"... it is said that we cannot wash our hair not even take care of plants ... but I don't care..."

(female, 16)

"... I know we can't bake, but I don't even remember if I have to do it..." (female, 16)

3.3 Section III: Hygiene awareness

The interviewed girls did not consider sanitary towels expensive neither did they find it difficult to buy them. The majority uses sanitary pads and only a small number used tampons, mainly during physical education activities. No evidences regarding eco-friendly menstrual materials were observed. Considering the ability to manage menstruation in school settings, it was unanimous that the conditions of the school bathrooms are not the most appropriate (absence of appropriate disposables containers, lack of toilet paper, and soap to wash the hands). Half of the interviewees even revealed that they are not comfortable to use the school's bathrooms to perform their hygiene. Although they considered menstruation as being natural, it is a physical condition in which they don't feel very comfortable. They tend to disregard physical symptoms and focus on the cleanliness of their clothes. Two girls revealed to have painful

menstruation symptoms, like headaches and cramps, however, they considered normal and do not seek help from health professionals.

“... I use pads and tampons but I know there are other things ... I've seen it on YouTube ...”

(female, 16)

“...pads are cheap and they are sold everywhere...” (female, 15)

“... sanitary towels are sold at school at the stationary store ... if a boy is there I won't buy it...”

(female, 15)

“... I am going home to change; I am afraid someone can lurk at the school toilet ...” (female, 16)

“... school bathrooms never have toilet paper ...” (female, 16)

“...I prefer to wait and only change at home...” (female, 15)

“... I feel bloated and usually during that days I wear leggings because they are more comfortable...” (female, 16)

“... it bothers me ... I feel weird ...” (female, 16)

“... I just want it to disappear ... sometimes I don't go to school...” (female, 15)

“... I'm always asking if my clothes are dirty ...” (female, 16)

3.4 Section IV: Biological knowledge

The present section was where more evasive responses emerged, and more knowledge gaps were identified. Despite every participant was able to identify menstruation as the bleeding from the vagina, which occurs in a cycle of approximately 28 days, with on average 5 days long, they did not identify the phases of the menstrual cycle. None of the girls could answer where the blood comes from or why the need for bleeding arises, although they have said that period is necessary to have offspring and revealed that when they are menstruating, they cannot get pregnant. Regarding hormones, girls could neither identify the hormones present during menstruation nor their function. Two of the interviewees related hormones to the birth control pill. They demonstrated a deep lack of knowledge about the physiology of the female reproductive system.

“... appears every month but it is not always the same day...” (female, 15)

“... the period appears every month after 25 to 28 days...” (female, 16)

“... lasts 5 days and comes every month...” (female, 15)

“... hormones.....I don't know...” (female, 15)

“... (*hormones*) .. is what you take when you take the pill...” (female, 16)

“... have the vagina ... uterus and ovaries...” (female, 15)

“... ovaries... ” (female, 15)

4. Discussion

This article primarily aimed to enlighten a socially vulnerable group of girls on several menstruation related issues, such as, menstrual perception practices, hygiene awareness, and biological knowledge. Furthermore, we were also able to pinpoint gaps in society education regarding this issue. All in all, this article contributes to the demystification of menstruation, making it a subject that can be approached naturally.

Assessing menstruation perceptions and practices, hygiene awareness and biological knowledge among young girls and disseminate the identified needs through semi-structured interviews proved to be a useful tool to collect in-depth information systematically and reached the objectives.

A variety of factors need to be taken into account to prepare all components of an interview performed in an informal environment, as a non-guiding conversation. Therefore, the interest in receiving more support information was also embroidered, and the prevalent feeling was that they would like to receive more information in digital tools, for being easier to use and share. Also, a very recent study performed by Moon et al. [12] highlight the importance of increase the effectiveness of menstrual education programs. Taking those suggestions into account, digital tools could overcome the paucity of the financial and material resources and restrictive curricula.

Shortcomings of knowledge and lack of clarity of information arose during these interviews, especially when biological knowledge of menstruation is concerned, which ultimately undermines the knowledge and experience of the population studied. It is very important to increase literacy in female reproductive system, physiology, and hormonal regulation, to better understand behavior and body changes [13]. These findings are in agreement with several other studies outside Portugal and are not exclusives of socially vulnerable groups. Russell and Smith [14] found that young people have several gaps and misunderstandings, particularly the lack of understanding around basic female genital anatomy. These deficits in knowledge of menstrual biology were also referred by Hennegan et al. [15] as a common weakness reported by several authors.

This article highlights the need for improvement of the quality of sanitary facilities, giving special attention to the ones at schools so that girls feel more comfortable in performing their hygiene during menstruation. In the same way, Sommer et al. [16] and Sychareun et al. [17], indicated this issue to be taken into account for researchers and advocates as a public health problem. This severe problem is persistent and continues over time. To overcome the situation, the policymakers should be often reminded of these findings.

Despite the effort to include, in this preliminary study, girls from other vulnerable communities in the municipality of Oeiras, we didn't get the permission to contact those girls. This situation also highlights the lack of sensitivity and low relevance of the menstruation topic. Therefore, one of the weaknesses of the recorded information is to have been obtained from a small and restrict youth community.

Menstruation is not only a "female" issue since we are not all binary people [13]. Further studies will be developed to deliver in formal or non-formal education programs, including adolescent boys, so they can also understand the link between menstruation and changes to their bodies during puberty and their development.

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6. Conflict of Interests

Authors declare there is no conflict of interests.

7. Ethical

All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Atlântica – Instituto Universitário and CIQuiBio/IPS. Also 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards were considered. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants tutors.

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