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# The burdens of womanhood: A group of low-income adolescent girls' experiences of menarche/menstruation.

*University of Cape Town*  
Women's Mental Health Symposium - 2 August 2017  
The River Club  
Observatory, Cape Town



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# Introduction

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- Menarche & development of secondary sexual characteristics are salient markers in adolescent girls' development
- Menarche as a rite of passage into womanhood.
- Chrisler (2013) critical of this notion that puberty marks the entry into womanhood.
- Menarche is not only a biological event, but also a cultural, social and psychological process
- Embodied nature of girlhood - girls usually experience increased restrictions and surveillance (Britton, 1996; Koff & Rierdan, 1995; Ussher, 1989)



# Introduction



- Menarche/Menstruation is a complex, varied experience among girls
- Menarche / Menstruation as a positive experience
  - Sign of reproductive capability, more privileges & becoming women (Orringer & Gahagan, 2010; Teitelman, 2004).
  - Menarcheal competition among girls (Crawford & Unger, 2004)
- Persistence of a “conspiracy of silence” (Crawford & Unger, 2004) - menstruation is not celebrated but is surrounded with
  - Secrecy & concealment – e.g. Rupi Kaur’s experience with Instagram in March 2015
  - Shame
  - Menstrual taboos / myths



# Banished to Menstrual Huts





# Adverts & Culture of Concealment



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A leak can attract unwanted attention.



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# Menstruation – an inconvenience





# Menstrual Poverty



- Menstrual Poverty (Chrichton et al., 2013)
  - Contextual Factors – taboos, gender norms & social restrictions
    - Secrecy & concealment
    - Too knowledgeable – sexually promiscuous
  - Material deprivations – structural poverty
    - Lack of access to private & hygienic sanitation – home & school
    - Poverty - Sanitary materials – risk for infections
    - Schooling – absenteeism
  - Psychosocial deprivations
    - Lack of preparation, information prior to onset
    - Post menstruation – danger, surveillance, & control



# Introduction

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- Negative messages about menstruation & explicit warnings tend to make boys, sex & the girls' bodies as dangerous to girls (Martin, 1996)
- Negativity surrounding menstruation could create feelings of low self-efficacy, poor body-image & disconnection – low self-esteem & diminished sexual agency among girls (McMahon et al., 2011; Schooler et al., 2005)
- Worldwide, menarche seems to be fraught with ambiguity and contradictions for most girls



# Methodology



## Research design

- Study was exploratory and descriptive
- Employed a qualitative research design
- Using a feminist social constructionist framework and Objectification theory (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997)

## Participants

- 61 adolescent girls, aged 13-15 years, purposively selected
- 3 low-income communities in the peri-urban area of the Winelands
- Most of the girls are the children of farm workers who live on farms in the area
- Other participants lived in two townships in the area



# Methodology



## Data Collection

- Ethical considerations
- I conducted a series of 7 focus group discussions
- Each group met for 4 consecutive weekly group sessions that lasted approx. 90 minutes
- I also conducted individual interviews with some participants
- All the sessions and the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

## Data analysis

- Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
- The theme presented here focus on the girls' experiences of menarche & menstruation



# Findings & Discussion



## Menarche: Becoming a woman

### Preparation for menstruation

- Menstruation as an illness
- Menstrual taboos / myths

### The burdens of womanhood

- Menstrual experiences and practices
- Menstruation as danger and reproduction



# Menarche: Becoming a woman



- At menarche girls seem to get contradictory messages, which locates them in a liminal position; no longer child, but not yet a woman:

*Merle: She [her mother] said I am now adult, you stand, you stand now in your own shoes..it's now time to make my own decisions...my own choices...she said more stuff Miss, but I forgot everything. (L3P6:387)*

*Ashlene: My grandmother told me: a person must enjoy your childhood days while you can...and not keep yourself big (adult) because when you are big...then=*

*Ruby: =No we must play...a person can still play with dolls= [lots of animated talking and loud disagreement]*

*Sharon: =Now why must a person play with dolls?*

*Mandy-Lee: No...I have a lot of dolls but I don't play with dolls anymore*

*Sharon: A person don't feel like playing with dolls anymore Miss...a person can enjoy yourself but you don't have to play with dolls.*

*Sherine: mmm...but if you feel you don't want to play with dolls then it's  
13 also ok*



# Preparation for menstruation



- Most of the participants stated their parents/carers do not talk to them about menarche / menstruation:

*Edna: When you get your period...then you are a young girl*

*Sherine: Ok...now what do they tell you when you get your period? Do they talk to you? What do they tell you?*

*Zelma: My mother doesn't talk to me*

*Erica: uhhh..our parents don't talk to us about such things  
[laughter]*

*Zelma: They just buy you a packet of pads, that's all...they they say: "Did you get sick now?" [group laughs and agrees uhhh] then I just say: "Yes mommy" then everything is done (K2P10:70)*

- Despite this, mothers were still the primary source of information at menarche, usually a once-off talk at



# Preparation for menstruation



- However, 2 girls reported that they could talk to their mothers about their changing bodies:

*Carlene: For me it's nice to be a girl because everything that you ask your mother about your body...your mother explains everything to you..and if you ask your mother about the stuff..and the two of you talk much more nicer than a boy with the mother*

*Sherine: Ok..so the girl talks to her mother and you communicate with your mother..is this so for everyone?*

*Agnes: It's nice to talk with your mother about your body..and so...when something..for example, when you..get your first period then you can talk to your mother (L1P3:17)*

- Other sources of information were also cousins:

*Ruby: Nobody spoke to me..nobody spoke to me..I already knew..because my cousin already had her periods and my cousin showed me before the time (J1P15:74)*



# Menstruation as an illness



- Perpetuation and reproduction of illness narratives

*Sherine: Carol, you said your granny and your mother spoke to you. What did they tell you?*

*Carol: Just said I musn't play with boys when I'm sick*

*Sherine: Ok..and Elna? Did your mother=*

*Elna:=My mother told me when boys come and they want to play with me then I must walk away...they also say you musn't talk to a boy. You must keep yourself still when you are sick..because you can flow heavily  
(L3P6:351)*

*Mandy: Miss, when I'm sick I stress a lot*

*Ursula: Me too. I have lots of stress*

*Mandy: Then I don't even laugh Miss. Then I'm afraid it will fall out. It's strange*

*Sherine: When you're sick then=*

*Mandy: =I don't eat. I don't eat when I'm sick.*

*Sherine: Now why do you stress so?*

*Mandy: Then I stress even more when I'm sick... I'm afraid it will fall out  
(L3P6:345)*



# Menstrual taboos / myths



*Mary: Miss, it's strange, because I used to play a lot with the boys games...now a person can't play so nicely with boys. When they call me, then I say no...now a person can't play so nicely with them*

*Merle: I must be still, Miss when I'm sick...I mustn't be so wild. I am fond of milk and cheese. My mother says I mustn't eat milk and cheese...cold stuff=*

*Mary:=I always liked playing soccer with the boys...I mustn't be so wild anymore when I'm sick...just now it falls out [group agrees: uhh]. Yes Miss, I dress myself thick at the bottom. In Winter uhm I put on a thick tracksuit pants...then I put on a manga and a shorts and another shorts and a panty and tackies and four pairs of socks. Then I dress myself thickly. My mother says I must stay warm and put a towel around, then I play outside..then when I come home I'm soaking wet...then my mother scolds me.*

*Rose: I mustn't eat milk and eggs or cheese, because when you..when you..when you eat it you can flow a lot.*

*Ursula: I can't eat chocolates...no yoghurt and chocolates..milk*



# Menstrual experiences & practices



*Mercia: I cried the first time I got my period...I cried. I don't know Miss. [laughs shyly] I sat in the bathroom. Yes Miss so I shouted: Maaaaaa! [shouts out like she's afraid]*

*Ursula: I was also like that and so my mother came to look*

*Zena: My tears ran, Miss. So my mother said: "No, it's alright", so I said: "No, I don't want it. I don't want to wear pads". (L3P6:363)*

*Sandra: Periods..that's not nice [group laughs] because we get periods..that's not nice...because sometimes at school...the blood comes a lot then you flow right through...then it's not nice...I don't like it (L2P2:153)*



# Menstrual experiences & practices



*Jessy: [laughs] Miss, sometimes I worry..when maybe I skip a month Miss..then I worry..then I think: “Yho..am I pregnant now?” But I know..I didn’t do the thing. [laughter] (J2P16:47)*

*Zelda: Some boys just want to talk about precocious stuff  
Denise: Like some boys...they just want to talk about pads or tampons...then they want to know everything...then they ask: “What do you use? Do you use pads or tampons? Always?” Then they laugh...then they want to know...where do you put it in and if they can come and put it in (K3P12:131)*



# Menstruation as danger & reproduction



*Merle: Yes, Miss. My mother said said when you..when you..when you get periods it means you are fertile..so when you have sex for the first time then you can..you can=*

*Kathleen: =become pregnant.(L3P6:340)*

*Sherine: Say now you get your period for the first time..what will your mother say to you?*

*Mandy-Lee: My mother says: "You're a young girl now." Miss then my mother says...that's now the time when we must stay in the house Miss my mother cried and I may not even walk about [Group: Yes and laughter]*

*Leigh: My mother phoned everyone and said Red riding hood came around by me. My mother didn't cry, she only told me: "Hey I am glad! You mustn't do wrong things."*

*Mandy-Lee: They just cried so she said: "You must keep your little thing intact". (J1P14:301)*



# Conclusions

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- Consistent with previous research girls are ill-prepared for menarche/menstruation, they seem to experience ambivalence, fear, and are hyper-vigilant and anxious.
- Persistence of taboos & myths
- Losses associated with the onset of menarche, e.g. their relationships with boys change
- Girls' social world contract at menarche when parents tend to sequester the girls to protect them from the dangers without and/or within
- Narratives of danger about their sexuality could evoke feelings of shame among girls about their bodies, could lead to self-objectification & self-policing of their bodies
- Missing discourses of celebration and desire. Rather sexuality is seen as dangerous – disempowering fails to see girls as sexual subjects, able to exercise agency



# Acknowledgements

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- The participants for sharing their stories with me
- For a detailed reference list, see <http://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/97926>