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# Ways of bleeding : teenage girls' experiences of the menstruating body and the washable pad

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**2016**
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# Ways Of Bleeding: Teenage Girls' Experiences of the Menstruating Body and the Washable Pad

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**A thesis submitted to the department of Anthropology, University of Witwatersrand in partial fulfilment of the Degree of Masters of Arts in Social Anthropology.**

**March 2015**

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**COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

I declare that this is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the requirements of the Degree of Masters in Social Anthropology, at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

Signature:_____

Date:_____

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My gratitude goes to my supervisor, Dr. Nolwazi Mkhwanazi who guided me throughout my research and writing process, nurtured the idea of this study, and provided me with support and encouragement.

I also would like to thank the members of the department of Anthropology for the guidance and mentorship that they have offered me throughout my undergraduate and postgraduate years. I have definitely learnt a lot and grown as an academic with inspiration from you all.

I would also like to dedicate gratitude to the participants that made this research possible and from the help and guidance I received from Margie Prestorius, who all made this research and thesis possible.

I send special thanks to my mother who offered support and wisdom throughout my masters year and kept me strong through moments of weakness.

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores teenage girls' interpretations and experiences of menstruation. Using the work of Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) on the 'three bodies': the individual body, the social body and the body politic, this thesis looks into the different ways that teenage girls from the ages of 13 to 18 understand their menstruation and form meanings about themselves and their bodies through their menstrual experiences. In discussing menstruation, this thesis explores how gender norms, gender inequality, teenage sexuality and sexual behaviour are constructed as significant aspects of teenage girlhood. Finally, in using the washable pad as a way of exploring menstrual practices, the work in this thesis explores how teenage girls form their own understandings on what menstruation means to them, what it represents for their experience of girlhood and the different ways in which they come to understand the idea of being menstrual.

## INTRODUCTION

Every girl remembers their first menstrual experience. I was 11 years old when I had my first menstrual bleed. At that time, no one had ever spoken to me about what menstruation is and what its purpose was, nor had my mother reached the stage of having the uncomfortable 'birds and the bees' conversation with me. My family and I were on a road trip to Zimbabwe. It was an extremely hot day, as it always is at the Beitbridge border, and I was seated in the back seat of my father's old BMW moaning in slight agony from what I now know to be menstrual cramps. My mother had assumed that it was something I ate and continuously encouraged me to drink water to hopefully flush out my system. The pain of the cramps intensified as we waited in the long immigration queues at the border to get our passports stamped. I had chosen to sit on the hot tar in an attempt to provide some comfort to the agony that I, since then, have continuously described as a war within my uterus. My parents were too preoccupied with the chaos of the border queues and I sat in the sun being comforted by one of my older cousins. I wore light blue tights on that day and a short-sleeved white t-shirt with a printed picture of the pop group 'Spice Girls' on it. I remember the outfit because it was my favourite and also because moments later I had a stream of really dark-coloured blood staining the inner part of my tights and moving slowly down my inner thighs. I announced to my cousin, Brenda, who was 21 at the time, that I thought I had a cut because I was bleeding and she responded by untying her headscarf and telling me to wrap it round my waist to cover the visibility of the blood. She quickly ran off to notify my mother who was standing in a queue close by, and during that brief conversation, a few notes of money were exchanged and I was led off to the garage stop on the outside of the border post. The garage was nearly thirty steps away but the heat and the contractions in my abdomen made the brief walk an impossible journey. My cousin swiftly entered the shop part of the garage stop and bought something that she then covered in a black plastic bag, before she led me to the toilets behind the garage. I remember the small puddles of water on the toilet floors, the pungent urine smell and the cleaning lady who scolded us for interrupting her work but soon sympathized when my cousin explained my situation to her. My cousin and I both stood inside one of the toilet stalls. She opened the plastic bag, tore open the thick packet of pads, removed the wrapping, and then instructed me to remove the paper strip on the adhesive side of the pad, all after I had removed my stained tights. She handed me a clean pair of underwear and showed me how this

pad was to be worn. I never questioned anything. The sight of the pad was odd and foreign and so was the entire experience. I carefully slipped into the new pair of underwear that now had a bulge in the middle because of the thickness of the pad and I wrapped the headscarf around my waist again. And thus began what has been a complicated menstrual journey.

Over the years I have come to learn about the inner workings of my reproductive system and the many ways it influences my lifestyle and how my lifestyle, in turn, influences it. I have stood in many toiletry isles in many supermarkets comparing the prices between different kinds of pads and trying to find tampons to suit my heavy menstrual flow, while dealing with the burden of these products' ever-rising costs. And through my personal struggles of trying to find comfort within what for me is a continued monthly discomfort, I have experimented with different methods of managing my menstrual blood and its many symptoms. With every monthly cycle, and with every crippling experience of menstrual cramps and through the five days of having my saliva taste like metal, I have lived through and continue to live a menstrual experience that causes me distress.

This thesis is about the menstrual expressions and experiences of teenage girls and their exposure and engagement with alternative menstrual products, specifically the reusable sanitary pad. Using the introduction of this alternative menstrual management product as a discussion point, the thesis will reflect on the different ways in which girls develop meanings, menstrual practices, and a particular kind of menstrual consciousness in relation to their bodies. It will also explore what their experiences of menstruation represent and look into the lessons that the girls have learnt about being menstrual and becoming young women.

I have chosen to begin with a comment and reflection on my own menstrual experience and menstrual journey because it resonates with the stories that I heard from young girls while I was doing this research. The tampon was thought of as intrusive in the way that it is inserted into the vagina, while the pad had become a more culturally acceptable menstrual product to use. It was only after my teenage years that I recognized the many ways in which my menstrual experience was significantly influenced by the menstrual products that I chose to use and that each product had a different set of social and cultural meanings attached to it. Each highlighted different ways in which

menstrual blood flow could be dealt with and fostered differing attitudes about the experience of menstruation. It is through this understanding that, upon finding out about the washable pad and other forms of alternative menstrual products, I chose to explore how different the menstrual experience of teenage girls may or may not be with alternative menstrual interventions. I also decided that it would be important to investigate what ideas they would develop around these products, around their bodies, and around the experience of menstruation. My initial interest upon beginning this research was to explore whether the use of alternative menstrual products affected the menstrual experiences of teenage girls, but through my fieldwork, my attention shifted to a focus on teenage interpretations of menstruation and what they reflected about teenage girlhood, through the experience of menstruating.

In exploring an interest in alternative menstrual products through internet-based discussions on multiple blog-spaces, I was introduced to menstrual activist movements and the promotion of low-cost sanitary pads as interventions for menstrual hygiene in a number of developing southern African countries. The promotion of low-cost sanitary products was a means of addressing issues around poverty, access to hygienic facilities, concerns around menstrual practices, access to adequate sanitation, and in a broader sense, addressing issues around the reproductive health rights of young women and their conceptions of sexual health.

Alternative menstrual management has been written about most recently in relation to concerns about teenage girls' ability to access education. This particular understanding has been and continues to be contested through studies that state that, "menstruation has very little impact on school attendance [and that] improved sanitary technology has no effect" on increasing and guaranteeing attendance (Oster and Thornton, 2011: 91). I develop my work around the understanding of the former, to contextualize the growing use of different alternative menstrual products as interventions for teenage girls and their access to education. The menstrual experience and the limited availability of menstrual resources, such as menstrual products, menstrual knowledge, and environments that accommodate the menstrual experience, has been considered to be a barrier to education for young girls, thereby promoting and perpetuating gender inequality. Sommer (2010) expresses this understanding through a discussion of the gender gap in education that is extended by the onset of menstruation in schooling environments in Tanzania where girls are said to face a number of challenges in managing their menstruation. Petchesky (2000) explores the idea of gender

inequality as expressed in attempts to achieve justice through promoting reproductive health rights. Scott et al (2013) comment on the provision of free sanitary pads and menstrual knowledge in Ghana as an effort to promote equality in education through improving school attendance.

In developing my research, I therefore thought of the schooling environment as a complex space for teenage girls and their menstrual experiences and as a space in which to explore different variations of inequality. I also thought of it as an important space in which to explore the different ways in which young girls learn to navigate through their menstruation as a lived experience.

In 2011, ANC Youth League Secretary Vuyiswa Tulelo made a call for the distribution of free sanitary towels in the same manner that condoms were freely provided at public health institutions. Tulelo (2011) suggested that the reproductive health and hygiene of young women required the same prioritisation that the implementation of condoms has received, and that this would help address the reproductive health rights of young women that are severely affected by different levels of poverty. In other words, this would be a way of promoting a particular kind of social justice. Providing sanitary towels to young girls and women who experienced different levels of inaccessibility was described as a way of promoting gender equality by acknowledging the reproductive realities of young women and girls throughout the country (Times LIVE, 2011). Scott et al. (2013) revealed that, through work conducted in Ghana and Uganda, the provision of sanitary pads was considered "an unnecessary luxury" (2013: 1). They also observed that young girls engaged in unhygienic menstrual practices where they would resort to using different kinds of absorbent materials, usually pieces of cloth that they would find around the house, to create makeshift pads to handle their menstrual flows, some of which may be hazardous.

A recent investigation of menstruation and its relationship to the water, sanitation, and hygiene sector (WASH) in Uganda explored the difficulties faced by school girls in terms of finding ways to manage their hygiene during menstruation. It examined what impact low-cost sanitary pads would have on menstrual practices and other aspects of concern. This investigation explored the necessity of low-cost sanitary pads as an intervention to address the difficulties that school girls experienced in managing menstruation especially in schooling environments (Crofts and

Fisher, 2010). The study estimated that on a daily basis 200 million menstruating girls and women in low-income countries experienced increased difficulties in finding "clean water for washing, private places for changing and adequate blood absorbing material" and these issues were said to be further complicated by issues around "social systems, political indifference and cultural customs" (Crofts and Fisher, 2010). The development of menstrual hygiene management appeared to encourage a more critical public health engagement with issues concerning women, allowing them greater recognition on national and international agendas. Governments, health institutions and NGOs acknowledged that neglecting the reality of menstrual hygiene would impede on achieving a number of the targets set out by the United Nation's Millenium Development Goal. These particular goals were "the elimination of gender disparity in education (target 3A); increasing sustainable access to basic sanitation (target 7C); and the full and productive employment of all, including women (target 1B)" (Crofts and Fischer, 2010: 3).

Similar work has been conducted in other developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and other regions such as India and South East Asia, in which the focus has been on understanding how urban sanitation systems manage and influence women and girls' hygiene practices and habits of disposal (Kjellen et al., 2012). Research conducted in resource-poor settings in Kenya has also explored the ways in which school girls navigate menstruation according to perceptions that they have developed for themselves. The research showed that most girls experience menstruation as stigmatized and their management practices are significantly influenced by a number of factors, particularly access to menstrual resources and knowledge shared about menstruation and menstrual conduct within their social environments (McMahon, et al., 2011; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2013).

Concerns around menstruation in South Africa have focused predominantly on menstrual hygiene. What has yet to be explored is menstruation as a lived experience in which recognition and awareness about menstruation is seen as socially significant. Very little has been written about menstruation outside of the context of menstrual hygiene concerns and practices, implying that the lived reality of being a menstruating teenage girl has been neglected.

The popularity of commercially produced, disposable menstrual products calls for an exploration of its cultural acceptance and the meanings that they are ascribed. This would allow for an understanding of the way that reusable

sanitary products are received and understood. I plan to explore this further in my work because I assume the act of developing meanings to be particularly important in understanding lived experiences of menstruation. I assert at this point that menstrual management products are ascribed particular meanings and values and that these meanings and values are what influence menstrual knowledge and menstrual practices, producing a circular conception of the menstrual experience.

Alternative menstrual products in South Africa are slowly developing a presence, but there is little established literature about them outside of the context of menstrual hygiene or about how they influence or do not influence the lived experience of menstruation for women and young girls. It is therefore significantly important to explore this as it speaks to broader issues around reproductive health and health knowledge for young girls and the influence of different cultural understandings of menstruation

**THESIS MAP**

My dissertation begins with a description of the methods that were used within this research. This is followed by a literature review that explores the cultural context in which menstruation has been understood across time and through different cultures in a number of anthropological texts. In this exploration I reflect on prominent aspects of menstruation such as pollution and 'blood politics' to highlight the different cultural interpretations around it and to show how it has been problematized through various menstrual practices. I look into the different ways that anthropological literature has explored menstruation as a socio-cultural event guided by different myths and taboos that have influenced the cultural construction of women's bodies. I also reflect on the symbolism of the menstrual experience and show how cultural understandings of menstruation and reproduction have significantly informed its medicalisation and vice versa.

I draw from the work of Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) on 'The Mindful Body' as a framework for my argument about menstruation as a significant representation of the many aspects of the reproductive body. Here, I will make reference to the 'three bodies' as representations of the multiplicity of the menstrual experience. I will also use it to show the three perspectives from which the menstruating teenage body can be viewed. In their work, Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) refer to the 'three bodies' as representations of three distinct aspects of self in relation to the body, encompassing "a phenomenally experienced individual body-self; a social body [which is] a natural symbol for thinking about relationships among nature, society, and culture; and…a body politic, [that serves as] an artefact of social and political control" (1987: 6).

In Chapter two I provide a description of the 'body-self' or the 'individual body', forming a discussion about the way that my participants described and interpreted their individual experiences of menstruation. The chapter begins with recollections of menarche and the onset of the girls' menstrual journeys, examining the manner in which they understood their initial menstrual experience and what ideas they then formed from this. This will show how although "people share…some intuitive sense of the embodied self…the constituent parts of the body…and their relations to each other, and the way in which the body is received and experienced…are highly variable" (Scheper-

Hughes and Lock, 1987:7). This chapter will explore ideas of experience, embodiment and self and how they are conceptualised within the menstrual experience.

Chapter three will be a discussion of the 'social body' as a way of understanding the manner in which the body is used as a representational tool. It will look into how the body is "a natural symbol with which to think about nature, society, and culture" demonstrating a continuous exchange and development of meanings around the body in relation to the social environments in which it exists (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987: 7). In this chapter, I will explore the many ways in which the girls construct their menstrual experiences in relation to what they have learnt throughout their years of menstruating. It will also explore the many ways that the girls have built ideas around their menstrual blood as a polluting, sexualised, and culturally-constructed substance. It will look at how their use of the washable pad created moments in which they had to come into direct contact with their menstrual 'waste'. In essence, what will be highlighted in this chapter will be the politics that surround menstrual blood and the different ways in which menstrual taboos are expressed and maintained. Drawing from the work of Emily Martin (1987), I look into metaphors used by the girls to speak about menstruation.

Finally, chapter four will confront the 'body politic' which refers to "the regulation, surveillance, and control of bodies in reproduction and sexuality…[resting] on its ability to regulate populations (the social body) and to discipline individual bodies" (1987: 8). This chapter will explore the different ways in which the menstruating female body is socially constructed and regulated through the experience of menstruation. It will also explore the ways in which the bodies of teenage girls are regulated through stigmatized ideas of sexuality and the fear and threat of teenage pregnancy.

## CHAPTER ONE

## METHODS

The research presented is based upon fieldwork carried out over a period of five months, from the beginning of July to December 2014. It began at the house of Mary Peterson, a silver-haired and slender woman who lived with her husband on the premises of a popular Johannesburg high school. Upon arrival, Mary welcomed me into her cosy, wooden-floored home and I sat in the kitchen while she made me a cup of honeyed rooibos tea with lemon. On this day, a lovely friendship began to develop as I told her about myself and my interest in her work and she offered up an interesting life history on herself and the work she was and has been doing. She explained her affiliation with Project Dignity, an NGO that her friend, Susan, had started in order to address a need that was made known to her by her daughter through a school project in which the daughter had to donate menstrual pads for charity work. From this, Susan identified a need and decided to use her experience in fabric manufacturing to develop what they have now called Subz Washable Pads, a sanitary pad that could be reused after washing, which they planned to distribute to school girls in need. We sat in Mary's craft office and through her explanation of her love of craft, her move to Johannesburg from KwaZulu Natal, and her concerns around the complexities of menstruation for teenage girls, she unravelled how layered her work was and why my presence was extremely important for her. And throughout our continued interactions and many travels together conducting what she called 'activations', which are distribution sessions for the washable pad, I was exposed to Mary's radiating warmth and personal politics about being a woman, both menstrual and menopausal.

My fieldwork was multi-sited, exposing me to different interpretations of menstruation and shared understandings of it as well. I conducted focus group discussions with girls between the ages of 14 to18 years old, from two different high schools, namely Kwena Molapo Senior Secondary School in Mangope, Lanseria, and Masibamambane College in Orange Farm. The third group of girls were students from an after-school programme based in a church yard in the township of Diepsloot. The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions that addressed a particular set of themes that I believed would develop from the conversations between myself and my participants and amongst the participants themselves.

I also assisted Mary in her distribution work and was a participant in the informal workshops that she was invited to conduct with the students from Masibambane College. Although all participants were from the same racial category, they represented different age groups and grades, and had differing levels of understanding of menstruation. This allowed me to be able to follow the way the girls developed different understandings of their menstrual experiences at different stages in their teenage lives according to the knowledge they were being exposed to.

My sample group consisted of girls who had started menstruating and had received the reusable sanitary pads from the distributions work that Project Dignity conducted. The reason behind that was that I wanted to use the reusable pads as a platform for discussions around menstruation, menstrual practices, menstrual knowledge, and body consciousness through the experience of menstruation. Through this distribution work, I was able to move around with the pad and be able to observe the responses it received and the knowledge that it shared and ultimately produced through its use.

Although I accessed each school environment differently, in each encounter with my participants I would request 5 volunteer participants from each grade with the help of the teaching staff that would assist me in coordinating these discussion groups. Each encounter produced different relationships and interactions with the girls, faced different challenges in terms of scheduling, and revealed different daily experiences from the girls.

In addition to using group discussions as the bulk of my fieldwork, my continued relationship with Mary allowed me to be part of a range of activities regarding menstruation that filled her daily life. In the month of August, for example, I had the opportunity to accompany Mary to a mother-daughter women's month conference that she was invited to. Mary's invitation involved a presentation on Subz Washable Pads in promotion of alternative menstrual products and menstrual awareness. The conference was held as part of a church celebration of womanhood and was held in a beautifully decorated church hall within the township of Sharpville. Members of the congregation participated in the event as a way of promoting a more engaged relationship between the mothers and the daughters within the church. The event included guest speakers from visiting churches. It had presentations from church elders and younger church members about the significance of developing an intimate spiritual relationship between mothers

and daughters as an effort to bridge what they referred to as ‘a generational gap’ that caused dysfunction in this said relationship. As part of addressing the dysfunctional nature of mother-daughter relationships, all speakers within the event lectured on the significance of the menstrual experience as a shared experience of womanhood.

I participated in the event as a guest, and spent the majority of my time observing the interactions between the women at the event and participating in the conversations that took place between the women that were seated with me at our table. Two of the women were church pastors from visiting churches and another was a member of the church hosting the event. My participation in the event, my interactions with the women that I was seated with, and my exposure to the conversation of menstruation and womanhood within a church environment allowed me to explore menstruation as a shared spiritual connection between mothers and daughters, as expressed by the speakers that were present at the event.

Mary presented on the reusable pad and the menstrual cup as alternative menstrual management methods that could enhance and provide comfort to the menstrual experiences of both mothers and daughters. Viewing the responses of the mothers that were exposed to this alternative menstrual management practice was a very interesting part of the entire event. It allowed me to look at the experience from the point of view of mothers and whether they found these products as necessary additions to the menstrual practices that they had developed for their daughters’ menstrual lives. Motherhood was an interesting addition to the conversation around menstruation.

In addition to this, my continued interaction with Mary through the work we collaboratively conducted was a great way to punctuate all the interactions that formed the bulk of my fieldwork. My time spent with Mary was a collection of reflective conversations around her past experiences; her menstrual years; the challenges she experienced through menopause; the dynamics of family life and her experiences of womanhood, femininity, and a developing consciousness around the female body. Motherhood and spiritual faith was a significant aspect of her recollections of self and was a window into the purpose of her engagement with menstrual politics and awareness. Our long drives from our week-long engagement in Orange Farm and the journey from Johannesburg to Sharpville and back were important moments we used to digest our interactions with the menstrual knowledge and awareness of

the people we engaged with. Mary was a significant part of the work that I did, and her influence will be reflected as this body of work develops.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Menstruation, pollution, and blood politics*

Literature around menstruation has grown out of a focus primarily on developing an understanding of menstrual blood as culturally symbolic and meaningful. It attempts to configure menstruation as part of a social order that creates and maintains certain gender roles. In many senses, menstruation signifies the onset of womanhood and outside of its biomedical conceptualization, it is associated with fertility, growth, child birth and sexuality. In essence, menstruation is a biomedically and culturally defined performance of womanhood and fertility. Significantly different from other bodily fluids that signify particular stages of one's life cycle, such as breast milk as a signifier of motherhood, menstrual blood has been ascribed a variety of cultural meanings that influence the way in which the concept of menstruation is understood. It encourages particular sets of beliefs that affect the way in which women develop relationships with their bodies and selves. This fixation on menstrual blood has been the basis of menstrual discourse that explores menstrual taboos as important sets of cultural knowledge. Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb (1988) in '*Blood Magic*' revealed that "the topic of menstruation has long been a staple of anthropology [as an] ordinary biological event [that] has been subject to extraordinary symbolic elaboration" (1988: 3). The authors state that "the symbolic potency so often attributed to menstrual blood and the exotic-seeming stringency of rules for the conduct of menstruating women have placed menstruation in the foreground of anthropological studies of 'taboo' and, more recently, of symbolic 'pollution'" (Ibid). Its conceptualisation as a taboo is based on the understanding that menstruation is an occurrence that does not fit into a particular social order and therefore defies it and requires several forms of regulation to control it.

In addition to this, "menstrual taboos have been seen by turn as evidence of primitive irrationality and of the supposed universal dominance of men over women in society" (Ibid). In explaining taboos, Buckley and Gottlieb express that, "again and again, ethnographers have reported that menstrual blood and menstruating women are viewed as dangerous and/or offensive" showing how menstruation as a biological event has continuously been framed as a type of pollution that is managed through seclusion and isolation ( Buckley and Gottlieb,1988: 6).

The authors show in their discussions that menstruation's association with pollution is central to most cultural analysis. They state that a number of the discussions around menstrual taboos have centred on exploring the idea of pollution as symbolising a particular kind of contamination. Menstrual blood and women that are menstruating have been defined through cultural practices and knowledge as a threat to an established social order (cf. Britton, 1996). The creation of taboos was and still is a way of enforcing a sense of control and developing guides that would maintain this established social order through regulating the body of women. Placing menstruation within the framework of pollution theory opens an entire analysis of the symbolism of menstrual blood as part of cultural practice. Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) make reference to the work of Mary Douglas in her work '*Purity and Danger'* in which Douglas states that "the cultural coding of a substance as a pollutant is based in a shared perception of that substance as anomalous to a general symbolic, or cultural, order. Pollutants are coded as 'dirt,' symbolic 'matter out of place'. As such, pollutants are at once a product of a specific symbolic order and a danger to it" (1988: 26). In elaboration, Buckley and Gottlieb state that

> menstrual blood is a particularly apt candidate for analysis…[because] as blood itself, menstrual discharge is 'out of place,' breaching the natural bounds of the body that normally contain it. All forms of human bloodshed may be coded as polluting, but menstruation is generally found especially so. Menstrual blood does not issue randomly or accidentally, as does the blood of wounds, but from a single source and to some extent regularly and predictably…Again, in flowing from the reproductive organs of women such blood, rather than signalling a threat to life, is recognized by most peoples as signalling its very possibility (Ibid).

This act of bloodletting is understood to be the only event in which men do not have control over, therefore making the act of menstruating an event outside of their influence, experienced and regulated by women, and as a result constituting a symbolic anomaly (Buckley and Gottleib, 1988). Involved in the conception of pollution from anomalous entities, is the role that is played by ideas of power in which these anomalies are "granted a negative or positive valence to be determined through specific cultural analysis" (1988: 27). Symbolism as a feature of this discussion serves a social function of establishing meanings and values within certain groups of people. When associated with body concepts, it shows how the practices related to the body "mirror the society in which they occur" (1988:28). Through this, discussions of the significance of understanding the interplay between social and the

physical body begin to emerge and deepen the exploration of menstruation as not merely an act of female biology, but as a significant site for understanding body politics, gender, and sexuality.

Menstrual customs are part of a system of practices that are created to maintain a certain kind of order and control. One of the critiques put forward about Douglas's work (cited in Buckley and Gottleib, 1988) on pollution theory is that the very construct of pollution is established within a male-dominated system of thought. Buckley and Gottlieb state here that "until very recently society has been analytically treated as a result of and a vehicle for male action" and this reveals the reality that "women are the passive recipients of male-created cultures…[and] it is this male-focal vision of culture and society that underlies analyses of pollution as an index of socio-cultural tension" (1988: 31). The authors reveal here that in cultural studies on menstruation, ethnography has relied to a great extent on the male voice. They state that "it is men who have by and large defined menstruation as polluting" and these are ideas that young girls appear to have internalised in their understanding of their own menstrual experiences and engagements with blood (Ibid).

Narratives around menstruation have not been completely representative of the experiences of women or young girls and how they negotiate their daily lives around their menstrual cycles and the bodily practices that surround them. In the same way, men's interpretations have provided a very limited understanding of menstruation, one that disguises the complexities that are involved in developing a system of understanding (Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988). What Buckley and Gottleib attempt to show is the very narrow understanding of menstruation that has come to be accepted as truth. According to them,

> when one consults the index of an ethnography, if reference to menstruation is included at all, it is almost invariably included under the rubric of 'menstrual pollution'. One has the impression that most, if not all, societies view menstruation as a source of pollution, in extension of Douglas's general theory, and that there is no more to be said. Yet it is clear that the situation is hardly that simple, and that the very power of pollution theory, coupled with Western societies' own codings of menstrual blood as a pollutant, has perhaps created 'dirt' where none previously existed, or existed only for some people and/or in some contexts in a given culture (1988: 32).

***Symbolism of menstrual blood and taboos***

The anomalous quality ascribed to menstrual blood has allowed for it to be understood in terms of the power it possesses and continuously establishes through its relationship with other symbolic aspects of cultural practices within various societies. With this, Buckley and Gottlieb (1988:34) express that, "the symbolically constituted power of menstrual blood makes it 'naturally,' in Douglas's terms (1970), a prime substance for manipulation in rituals." In the same way, it is present in contemporary feminist activism, in protests, exhibitions, and media, as the writings of Chris Bobel (1963) will explain later. The symbolic meanings attached to menstrual blood dictate the way in which practices around the menstruating female body are developed and maintained. Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) report on the fact that menstrual blood's multiple meanings allow it to be used for a variety of purposes both within and across cultures. As an example, they explain the use of menstrual blood in harmful practices such as witchcraft whereby "[t]he use of menstrual blood…thus seems to exist within a continuum of negative effects and manipulations all reflecting a clear underlying notion of pollution" (1988: 35). Conversely, positive use of menstrual blood is linked to its utilization in love potions and charms to ensure the fidelity and commitment of one's partner (Buckley and Gottleib, 1988). As an extension of the idea that menstrual blood is associated with aspects of power expressed through the use of metaphors, the authors explain how "amongst such metaphors that of 'life force' is perhaps most striking. In this case menstrual blood is viewed as an emblem or manifestation of creative power, particularly in the sense of fertility," but the varying symbolism behind meanings around menstrual blood reveal a complexity that is beyond pollution theory and intricately connected to concepts of power and life (1988: 36). My research, in this aspect, will look into the way in which young adolescent girls have conceptualised menstrual blood as part of their menstrual lives through particular practices that they develop during their monthly cycle.

***Menstrual practices, the body, and the social stigma around menstruation***

The concept of personhood is significantly important to understanding the cultural implications of menstruation. It highlights the way in which women relate to ideas about their bodies and their ideas of self. Conklin and Morgan (1996) make the argument that "bodies (as well as persons) are the products of cultural practice rather than asocial blank slates upon which cognition, relationships, and social priorities are subsequently inscribed" (1996: 659). In addition to this, they make the claim that "both bodies and persons are produced in social contexts" and within a

network of culturally specific meanings maintained through practices and systems of knowledge that constitute taboos (Ibid). Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) express in their example of Asante women of Ghana that,

> although the Asante view menstrual blood as definitively polluting, subject to 'one of the greatest and deadliest taboos in Ashanti,' they also celebrate menarche with elaborate ritual for individual girls in which the menarcheal girl, among other things, sits in public view beneath an umbrella…receiving gifts and congratulations and observing singing and dancing performed in her honour. Within Asante society, then, menstrual symbolism is highly complex…Among the Asante as among comparable peoples, we are in a realm far beyond the grasp of any simple model of menstruation-as-pollution (1988: 37).

In elaboration of this point, the authors "suggest that such diversity in meaning is strongly tied to indigenous conceptions of the biological function of menstruation in the reproductive cycles of women" and this is commonly tied to conceptions of fertility (Ibid).

In a very complex sense, menstruation is not merely a biological event with a material manifestation of blood, but, like in the case of the Wari' of the native Amazonia society and their notions of socially constructed bodies, "certain biological functions [are] fundamentally social products that are made and remade through exchanges with others in a social world" (Conklin and Morgan, 1996: 670). The gendered experience of menstruation produces sets of knowledge only accessible through understanding the relationship women and girls have with each other, with themselves, and with men and boys within their societies through continuous exchanges of information, practices, and attitudes and bodily substances. Conklin and Morgan (1996) state that, "the Wari' do not consider menarche, menstruation, or male maturation to be events produced solely within an autonomous individual body. Rather, they believe them to be produced through interactions with other people" (1996: 674). In their conception of menstruation, the body of the girl or woman is understood through its continued interactive relationship with the boys or men, in which the bodily fluids of men help in the construction of meanings around the fluids of women. The authors state that,

> for girls, sexual intercourse is the transformative biosocial event. Male semen is believed to have vitalizing properties that transform female blood…the infusion of semen stimulates her blood and makes it increase in quantity… [therefore] not only is female productivity enhanced, so is female reproductivity: semen catalyzes the production of menstrual blood, the stuff of which foetuses are made (Ibid).

The authors indicate a very important relationship between menstruation and ideas around reproduction and express that “the Wari’ assert that virgins do not menstruate. Throughout a woman’s reproduction life, in fact, menstrual periods are said to follow sexual intercourse” an aspect significant to understanding the way in which young girls understand sexual activity in its relationship to menstruation and their changing bodies or see themselves as sexualised through menstruation (Conklin and Morgan,1996: 674). In the context of the Wari society, menstruation outside of sexual intercourse is not considered menstruation at all, “they dismiss vaginal bleeding that comes after times of celibacy by saying that it is not real menstruation” and classify this kind of bleeding as blood that “flows for no reason” (Ibid: 675). This kind of construction of the female body creates an understanding of menstrual blood as “the product not of a woman’s autonomous body, but of a connection between her body and the body of a man” (Ibid). Constructed ideas about the menstruating woman and the menstruating body appear to be the projects of male-dominated models of body consciousness that allow for limited understandings and experiences of the body and the social positions it assumes.

Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan Chrisler (2011) further develop the relationship between menstruation and body consciousness by addressing menstruation as socially stigmatized. In discussing the way in which menstrual blood is being used as material for artists expression, the authors attempt to show how reactions to this form of artistry open up spaces to discuss societies detached and disconnected understanding of menstrual blood, asking “why a mundane product of nature is so shocking, given that most women experience their menses and manage their own menstrual flow for decades of their lives” (2011: 9). The authors believe that the artists, “want us to consider why menstruation, a benign process essential to the production of human life, evokes fear, disgust, and comparison to toxic waste” as a way of revealing the fact that menstrual fluid is a heavily stigmatized substance (Ibid). This stigmatization expands beyond menstrual fluids and has come to include stigmatization of practices around managing menstruation and its symptoms, furthering the medicalization of menstruation and menstrual blood.

Goffman (1963) cited in Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2011) describes stigma as “any stain or mark that sets some people apart from others: it conveys the information that those people have defect of body or of character that spoils their appearance or identity” (2011: 9). In theorising stigma, Goffman established three distinct types, namely:

“abominations of the body”, blemishes of individual character” and “tribal identities or social markers associated with marginalized groups” of which the authors claim menstrual blood falls into all three. Through rituals and hygiene practices, menstrual blood is constructed as a substance very intimately associated with concepts of dirt, highlighting the significance of Douglas’s (1970) pollution theory, perpetuated through different forms of media. The association of leaked menstrual blood on items of clothing with tainted femininity exposes an idea of menstruation as something that should not be part of the public realm. It maintains that “visible signs of menstruation represent emblems of girls’ contamination...[that] can lead to avoidance and social distancing...suggest[ing] that menstrual blood may serve as a blemish on women’s character” (2011: 10).

In addition to this, menstrual blood is a marker of identity in a manner that highlights the femaleness of girls or women, marking them as “different from the normative and privileged male body” (2011: 10). The authors state that beliefs motivated by culturally stigmatized understandings of menstruation commonly represent menstruating women as “ill, disabled, out-of-control, unfeminine”, showing a very narrow conception of menstruation and the experience of it (Ibid). Furthermore, the increased use of oral contraceptives from the 1960s onwards, created a different kind of oppressive understanding of menstruation in which women were provided the capacity to control their cycles as something that needed to be avoided (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2011). Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2011: 11) state that, “the stigma of menstruation is conveyed to us every day through a variety of sociocultural routes…[and] transmitted through products and media we see every day.” It normalizes an alienated experience of menstruation maintained through “emphasizing secrecy, avoidance of embarrassment, and freshness;” a discourse of self-consciousness (2011: 11). Also, “most of the attitudes these media convey are negative, and together they have constructed a stereotype of menstruating women, especially premenstrual women, as violent, irrational, emotionally labile, out-of-control, and physically or mentally ill” (Ibid). The separate communication mechanisms that are used to facilitate conversations about menstruation, one that excludes the participation of boys, conveys menstruation as “a special topic” (2011:12). It reiterates the idea of secrecy and concealment, much to the detriment of “women’s health, sexuality, well-being, and social status” (Ibid).

***Menstrual suppression***

Gloria Steinman's (1978) essay imagines a society in which men participate in the event of menstruation as a way of highlighting the fact that women's lower social status creates a stigmatized conception of the experience. The social positions that men assume provide legitimacy and significance to their experiences in the social, cultural, and political realms. Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2011: 13) state that Steinman's essay "helps readers to understand that menstruation, as a biological, cultural, and political phenomenon, is only a 'problem' because women do it," and this is how women have come to conceptualise the experience of menstruating. As a significantly problematic aspect of womanhood and femininity, the way in which women and young girls have come to confront and continue to confront the biological phenomenon of menstruation reflects the complicated relationships they continue to have with their bodies. The use of oral contraceptives challenges the conception of menstruation as an experience lacking in autonomy and agency, but in the same sense creates discussions about a growing sense of menstrual denial which feeds ideas of secrecy, taboo, and male-centred medicalized models of menstruation. This prompts the questioning of how young girls, particularly, learn to navigate around the experience of menstruation and negotiate their daily lives according to this.

Mamo and Fosket's (2009) writings on the '*Pharmaceuticals and the (Re)Making of Menstruation*' discuss an extended-cycle oral contraceptive called Seasonale that was created to work as a suppressant for women's and girls' menstrual cycles. They state that, "the emergence of Seasonale, along with other drugs aimed at regulating and minimizing menstruation, is part of ongoing biomedicalization process that emphasize risk reduction and management and the transformation of health itself….the changes they produce are culturally and socially meaningful in their aim to improve life in general…[and] such assumed improvements directly implicate the boundaries of health and illness and…often do so in particularly gendered ways" (Mamo and Fosket, 2009: 925). As an extension of this phenomenon of pharmaceutical intervention, Emilia Sanabria (2009) has written about menstruation as a form of "bloodletting" in Brazil. Her writing showed the role of menstrual suppression in this complex relationship between bloodletting and menstruation. Her article titled '*Alleviative Bleeding*' "deals with the gendered aspects of blood donation…explores cases of patients who use hormonal contraceptives which supress

menstruation and express concerns over the resulting accumulation of blood in the body…[and] considers how blood donation is adopted by some women as a means of dispelling both the perceived inconveniences of menstrual bleeding and it swelling effects" (Sanabria, 2009: 123). What the article reveals is a complex interaction between medicalized conceptions of blood practices and the way in which they directly and indirectly influence how women and young girls conceptualize their corporeal experiences through their understanding of blood. Sanabria (2009) explains that blood donations are seen to be a requirement for men because they do not menstruate, as menstruation is seen as a way in which the body "re-forms itself'. This understanding reveals a reiterated ignorance to the reality of menstruation maintained through the absence of adequate knowledge and the circulation of the wrong kind of menstrual information. This ignorance serves as a class indicator through which "people understand and narrate their bodies' capacities and workings" in accordance to the access to knowledge that their social positions allow (Sanabria, 2009: 127). Sanabria states that, "ignorance about medical regimes continues to index social marginality and poverty, and being [knowledgeable] about the body is key to being recognized as a 'modern', urban subject (2009: 128). The author reveals the complex ways in which medical intervention has medicalized menstrual blood and shifted the way in which women and men construct bodily practices.

Jewkes and Wood (2006) discuss the impact of ineffective use of contraceptives in South Africa due to stigmatized public health service. They see this as barriers to women's and young girls' capabilities to make autonomous decisions about control over their fertility and sexual activity. The authors show the complicated way in which young adolescent girls are required to negotiate their way through conflicting understandings of menstruation in which they are pressured to prove their fertility through childbearing and pressured to manage their sexuality through the use of contraceptives. In both instances, young girls appear to have limited agency in relation to their bodies. Their practices are usually misinformed and generally stigmatized by public health care facilitators who see contraceptives as agents to promiscuous behaviour and part of a "historical[ly] institutionalis[ed]…public acceptance of…pre-marital pregnancy" (Jewkes and Wood, 2006: 111). At the same time, the use of contraceptives generated fears around fertility, which revealed strong traditional conceptions of menstruation in relation to understandings around the reproductive system, whereby, as Jewkes and Wood state, "preachers at local African churches reportedly

preached that contraceptive use ‘punctures and spoils the eggs’”(Ibid). The authors also expose complicated relationships between adolescent sexual activity, contraceptive use, traditional contraceptive practices, the absence of menstruation, and misinformed conceptualizations of pregnancy, all mediated by notions of suppression (Jewkes and Wood, 2006).

In a broader sense, menstrual products and management practices provide a particular kind of social ordering, corporeal control, and compliance that structures the experience of menstruation as a particularly narrow and limited generic narrative that ignores the implications of class, race, and differing levels of poverty. It facilitates women’s participation in a male gaze that perpetuates negative associations to menstruation. And in turn, it stigmatizes the experience of menstruating, creating a complicated field for the exploration of body politics, reproductive awareness and issues around embodiment and personhood. Menstrual suppression is therefore a gateway into understanding the manner in which women and young girls negotiate their ways through the systems of power that exist within menstruation’s biomedical and cultural understanding and are constructing diverse experiences through alternative menstrual practices.

***Feminism and menstruation***

Menstrual activism is described as a feminist project aimed at greater political and social awareness of menstruation and the effect this could have on the lived realities of young girls and women across a variety of contexts. It is a product of Third-wave feminism and is an extensive part of the work of Chris Bobel (2010) who provides accounts of feminism’s development in line with issue around menstruation and menstrual politics. In her writing, Bobel (2010) develops a critical engagement with Third-wave feminism as a means of investigating a shifting understanding of women’s experiences. She states that, “when we take women’s lives seriously, we attend to the gaps and the absences in women’s lives, and accordingly to their consequences. Close attention to menstruation…can reveal much about cultural values and identities” (Bobel, 2010: 28).

In addition to this, the author expresses that, “a critique of corporate control of the menstrual body in an existential feminist framework following Simone de Beauvoir, Elizabeth Kissling argues that ‘the social construction of

menstruation as a woman's curse is explicitly implicated in the evolution of woman as Other...menstruation does not make woman the Other; it is because she is Other that menstruation is the curse," indicating that discussions about menstruation can easily be discussions of gender and sexual politics through an essentialist understanding of women's bodies in relation to those of men (Bobel, 1963: 28). Bobel writes that, "the feminist response to political issues centering on menstruation has largely been avoidance" in an effort to not perpetuate an understanding of women as being different from men, in fear that that this would be used as a means of oppression (Bobel, 1963: 29).

Challenging constructions of menstruation gives awareness to layers of gender injustices that exist and highlights the way in which the female body is positioned within our own society. In bringing about a consciousness about menstruation, menstrual activism attempts to combine the personal and private with the political and public. Bobel (1963: 30) states that, "menstrual activists assert that menstruation's uneasy place in both the private and public spheres reflects a detachment from the body, as well as the long reach of hyperconsumerism, at the root of so much human suffering."

With this, what develops is a kind of feminist interference that challenges a predominantly cultural interpretation of menstrual practices and what has been called 'menstrual etiquette'. This reveals that "androcentric cultural dictates specify that women should behave in public settings as if they did not menstruate...[and] part of a larger etiquette of behaviour between the sexes, which governs who my say what to whom, and in what context" (Bobel, 1963: 30).

## CHAPTER TWO

## THE SOMETHING OF MENSRUATION: THE EXISTENTIAL BODY

On the morning of the 29th of July, Mary had invited me to a distribution event at Kwena Molapo Senior Secondary School. The school had acquired sponsorship to receive a number washable pad care packs. Upon our arrival, I assisted with setting up what Mary was going to use during her presentation to the girls selected to receive the care packs. She brought with her a basket with three posters and additional props. The posters were infographs of a menstrual cycle; a labelled diagram of the vagina; and a labelled diagram of the female reproductive system. Once everyone had settled into the school's makeshift hall, Mary began her presentation by pointing to the poster with the picture of the vagina and asking the girls if they recognized what the picture was. Her question was met by bits of chatter amongst the girls that prompted her to answer. She stated that the picture was a representation of the vagina which was the female sex organ and she began a brief discussion about the way in which reproduction worked. She highlighted that conception took place when the female egg and the male sperm met during sex. Although not necessarily concentrating on a discussion about sex, Mary stated that sex was an act that should be conducted when the girls felt that they were ready for the experience, not implying the necessity for marriage. From this, she swiftly moved on to a discussion about the reproductive system.

She began by framing menstruation as something that should be understood as a cycle that connected young girls to the world around them, highlighting the lunar cycle that a few of the girls appeared to have knowledge of. To aid her explanation, she asked for a volunteer from the crowd of girls who would help her explain the way in which the reproductive system operated. One of the girls, Lerato, stood up and volunteered. Mary instructed Lerato to stand in front of the class with her arms extended to the side. She placed a bean in the palm of each hand. Lerato looked puzzled. The audience giggled. Mary then explained that Lerato's extended arms represented the fallopian tubes, her hands were the ovaries, and the beans were the unfertilised eggs that would move along the fallopian tubes during ovulation and await fertilisation in the uterus and result in menstruation if unfertilised. Mary was describing the materiality of the concept of reproduction in her interactive demonstration to the girls. In doing so, and in the way that she spoke about acknowledging and attending to the emotions and discomforts that came with the menstrual

experience, Mary described menstruation as an experience that the girls needed to actively engage in by recording their cycles, paying attention to how they treat their bodies during their cycles, and understanding how their individual cycles worked. She spoke about the different types of hormones that operated within the female body during their cycles and how these affected the body's behaviours and moods. She encouraged them to "learn about what your body does so that so that you know what to do during this time" (Mary). Towards the end of the presentation, Mary opened up the session to questions that the girls wanted to ask. The girls asked a number of things ranging from what role hormones played in menstruation to concerns and fears around pregnancy from irregular and occasionally missed periods. A number of the girls asked questions that revealed a very confused way in which they had come to understand their menstruation. In her explanations, Mary spoke about menstruation as an experience, as something that the girls needed to participate in. She encouraged them to "find what works for [them] to make periods less stressful." In framing the occurrence of menstruation as an important bodily experience for the girls, Mary's shared what Bobel (2010) defined as a "feminist-spiritualist" understanding of menstruation.

I used the account above to highlight how Mary continuously attempted to frame menstruation as something that needed to be experienced, felt, and engaged with emotionally. It is important because it highlighted very different interpretations of menstruation that my participants provided in our many conversations. Their interpretations showed that the girls developed their menstrual knowledge and menstrual understanding using different sources of information. Mary spoke extensively about the menstrual experience as being an opportunity to be "in the body" or as an extension of the bodily experience. This was done by highlighting the fact that emotions and feelings are an intricate part of the experience. In doing so, drawing from Bobel's notion of 'feminist-spiritualism,' Mary presented the girls from Kwena Molapo with an ideological interpretation of menstruation. She framed menstruation as something that needed to be 'experienced' by stating that girls should learn "to take care of themselves and their bodies and be in tune with them" (Mary, 2014).

I begin with Mary's recollection of her menstrual experience to highlight similar aspects of the menstrual experience that Mary and my participants share in their descriptions of how they have experienced their menstruation. I elaborate on the account given above to show how differently Mary framed the idea of menstruation drawing from

her own personal experiences and understandings. In doing so, I will show that my participants, through their own descriptions and recollections of menarche, reflected their own interpretations of the menstrual experience drawing from many knowledge sources in their social lives. I also indicate here that a great part of the menstrual knowledge that the girls shared with me was influenced by information that they received from there different schooling environments. Reflecting on information that I reviewed from my participants' Life Orientation and Life Sciences textbooks, I show that a substantial amount of the information that the girls are exposed to is significantly biomedical and supported by social interpretation of what menstruation means for their lives. I show here that Mary's feminist spiritualist interpretation and construction of menstruation was not something that the girls acknowledged or particularly related to. In their descriptions of what they understood of menstruation, the girls spoke of menstruation as a physiological occurrence, a discourse that promoted a disembodied experience. Their descriptions also acknowledged the fact that their menstrual experiences were indicators of growth, sexual maturation, and a representation of their reproductive potential. Our conversations also revealed that my participants understood menstruation as a gendered experience – something for women – and spoke of it as a way of learning about what their experiences as young women.

During a life history interview that I conducted with Mary while we shared a meal in a little café in Braamfontein, she reflected on her own menstrual experience as a teenager. She stated that she had a very vague memory of her menstrual years, and that in remembering her first bleed she did not remember it being a bad or traumatic experience. She believed it to be "calm and manageable," as something that she felt she could handle. She stated that she remembered being aware that she had started bleeding and that there was a brown smudge on her panty but that was as far as her memory went. She added that, although her mother did not provide her with substantial information about what menstruation was and how it should be dealt with, she [her mother] offered a sense of support throughout her menstrual years mainly by providing her with menstrual products whenever she needed them. Through her vague memory of this particular period in her life, Mary recalled that her menstrual experience was formed on a foundation of positive messages that did not frame the experience as shameful, although it was never spoken about.

Reflecting on her experiences with her body throughout her teenage years, Mary explained that her most prominent memory of her sexuality as a teenager was of it being "something that she did not know enough about or was fully in control of." She stated that during those years she did not feel like she had a healthy sense of being knowledgeable about her sexuality and she admitted to not having a healthy sense of boundaries as far as relationships with boys were concerned. She said, "It was just about exploring and usually the boys were very much in the lead…not always knowing where my boundaries were." Mary explained that over time, her biggest influence in terms of her understanding of sexuality was exposure to "a quite positive Christian message…Christian messages around sexuality can usually be very negative" but throughout her experience, sexuality was expressed as a good and positive practise. "The message was that sexual intercourse was to be enjoyed, but it was to be reserved for marriage, so that was the most significant influence on me in those growing up years." In remembering these particular years in her life and thinking about menstruation, she wished that there had been given messages that are more overt from other significant women in her life that menstruation was something positive and sacred. She added that her menstrual experience was not particularly negative but it was heavily silenced, not celebrated, and was not framed as being empowering, stating that "when I look back, I see that it is an untapped source of wisdom" (Mary).

Mary's reflections above and her reference to menstrual 'wisdom' were important in showing a particular knowledge about menstruation that she felt would be important for young girls to internalize during their menstrual experiences. In a workshop that she conducted with my participants from Masibambane College, I observed the many ways in which Mary reframed the girls' understandings of menstruation. She would speak at length about understanding one's own body and recognizing the power in this experience that all women shared. She would continuously encourage the girls to acknowledge the different ways in which their bodies "spoke to them" and realise that menstruation could be a very empowering part of their lives. In many ways, Mary's understanding of the menstrual experience, especially for teenage girls, could be thought of as an extension of what Bobel (2010) referred to as "feminist-spiritualis[m]". In this particular ideological activist construction of menstruation, coming from a second-wave feminist movement, "activists…reclaim menstruation as a healthy, spiritual, empowering, and even pleasurable experience for women" and extend, as Mary did, their personal understandings into political efforts (Bobel, 2010:

68). Mary was expressing, through her work, a particular kind of "life politics" in which the menstrual experience was treated and handled through non-medical, life-affirming, and body-positive practices and rituals (Ibid). .

Through my many encounters with Mary, and through observing and participating in her many menstrual teachings I realised that her form of activism, throughout her work, was to create a sense of menstrual consciousness in which the girls would find pleasure and joy in the act of menstruating. Mary would explain in her teachings that the experience of menstruation is an important symbol of being female. She expressed that if it was something that we (women and girls) felt an increased need to hide then it translated to us dumbing down our femininity, restricting our expressions of the experience of being feminine. She stated that

> *by not allowing ourselves to be fully feminine…[we are showing that] we are deeply disconnected from the natural world, from the moon, from the impact of the moon on our bodies and the impact of that is devastating on ourselves….and I think women have a particular role in reclaiming and becoming aware once again of our connection to the natural world….we need to regain a sense of being part of the natural world rather than being in dominion over the natural world (Mary,2014).*

The interpretations of the menstrual experience that Mary shared with the girls and I aspired to a particular sense of spirituality about the menstruating body, the act of menstruating, and to menstrual blood. In the conversations that I had with the girls after their interactions with Mary, they expressed very different interpretations of what menstruation was and what it represented for them, interpretations that did not recognize the ideas 'power' and 'spirituality' of the menstrual experience. In many ways, the girls presented knowledge they had acquired predominantly from school in which menstruation was explained as a physiological experience, and these interpretations were reiterated as part of their curriculum in a number of their classes.

**A biomedical interpretation of menstruation**

The concept of medicalization is a particularly important feature of my research in that it explains a particular interpretation of the menstrual experience and how it has been problematized. Conrad (2007) and Lock (1987) provide extensive literature about the concept of medicalization. Medicalization is explained to be a process centred on the idea of definition, that is "a problem is defined in medical terms, described using medical language, understood through the adoption of  a medical framework, or 'treated' with a medical intervention" (Conrad, 2007:

5). In exploring the ways in which my participants described, in many ways, what they understood about menstruation and where they acquired this knowledge, many of their descriptions alluded to a medicalised physiological understanding of what is a common human life process for women. It was also through their experiences of menstruation that my participants came to interpret menstruation as a 'sickness', understanding it through its symptoms that were an intricate part of the experience.

I used one of the girls' Grade 9 Natural Sciences textbooks to explore what kind of information the girls were being exposed to when learning about the act of menstruating and other aspects of reproduction. *Shuters Top Class Natural Sciences Grade 9 Learner's Book* has a section on human reproduction that begins with a mind map indicating the features of reproduction, namely puberty, sexual organs, stages of reproduction, and contraception. This unit in the book starts with a definition of the purpose of reproduction and states that, "in sexual reproduction, the male and female sex cells (the sperm and ovum) need to join together…[and] they form a special cell called zygote…[that] develops into a new baby" and this is followed with a brief discussion about puberty and how it is affected by sex hormones testosterone and oestrogen. The male and female reproductive systems are then explained through the use of labelled diagrams supported by brief descriptions underneath. Thereafter the unit shifts to an explanation of the stages of reproduction, where menstruation is discussed. In the book, menstruation is described as follows:

> If fertilisation has not happened in the oviduct, the lining of the uterus is not needed. About fourteen days after ovulation, the thick lining that has developed in the uterus starts to break down. The now useless blood and dead cells pass out of the woman's body through the vagina. This is known as menstruation or a 'period'. The bleeding goes on for several days until all the extra lining to the uterus has been lost. Once menstruation has finished, the uterus starts to build a new lining in case the next eggs gets fertilised. The next ovulation happens about 14 days after the start of the period, by which time the uterus lining is ready again to receive the fertilised egg (Ayerst, Smith, and Hill, 2013: 52).

The unit continues further with brief explanations of copulation, fertilisation, implantation, and gestation and concludes with a discussion about contraception as anything that prevents the process of conception. In all these descriptions, the book makes use of medical and biological terms to discuss the concept of reproduction. These descriptions do not imply illness in any way, but do encourage, through the use of medical language, that menstruation is primarily a physiological occurrence.

In their own descriptions of menstruation, my participants, in different ways, recognized the vagina and menstrual blood as significant features of their menstrual experiences and menstrual knowledge.

**Menarche, sexual socialisation, and the metaphorization of menstruation**

Recollections of menarche were an important point to begin my exploration of menstruation and menstrual knowledge. Each story shared revealed the way in which each girl formed an initial impression of the menstrual experience. It also revealed the menstrual knowledge that they were exposed to and the different ways in which they interpreted it. Here, I begin with a recollection of my visit to Diepsloot, where my participants provided me with interesting memories of their first experiences of bleeding. After a long school day, the girls gathered with me in one of the classroom containers in the church yard, where their after-school tutoring usually took place. Sitting two seats away from me in her untucked and unbuttoned white school shirt and short light-blue skirt, Thembeka comfortably shared the memory of her experience. She stated:

> *In 2010, I started [menstruating] and I noticed blood on my panty when I was in the toilet. I screamed when I saw it but I did not tell my mother about it. The following days I used a sock in my panties and I would hide the socks in the washing basket. When my mother asked about the socks, I lied and said that I didn't know. After some time she figured out what was happening and then she explained to me that I am becoming a woman now and that I must now use certain things [the pad].*

Thembeka's friend, Constance, provided a similar recollection of her menarcheal experience by explaining that:

> *Mine started when I was at school in Grade 6. When it happened, I wasn't really surprised because I knew that it was something that was going to happen at some point…They told us at school [that it was going to happen.]…It was at break time and my friend always used to say that sometimes the boys know when you are on your period because they can see your pad. It will show through your uniform. So when I went to the toilet, I could feel that my panty was wet and when I checked it I saw that it had blood. So when I got home they gave me pads and they told me that I must not sleep with boys now. I must make sure that I am fresh…Like it must show that I haven't fooled around with boys. They say that it will show if you have been doing naughty stuff. Your periods will get worse and you will bleed for a long time.*

In both of these recollections, the two stories revealed a particular way in which the menstrual experience was framed at the point of menarche. Both girls revealed being exposed to ideas of managing the experience through particular practices. They were also exposed to ideas about their own sexual vulnerability and the fact that their now menstrual selves needed to be treated in particular ways. This menstrual knowledge was usually shared with them by their mothers or other woman care-givers and was laced with cultural understandings of what menstruation

represented. The knowledge they received about the act of menstruating was vague in explaining what was physiologically happening to the girls' bodies. The girls would express this through statements such as "I was just told that I should just use pads now" or "they told me that I was now growing up." From the recollections they provided, the girls' descriptions were supported with cultural interpretations of what the menstrual act symbolised for their experience of girlhood.

A significant part of how the girls experienced menstruation was influenced by how they formed their own meanings of the act of menstruating. It was important to explore this to find out how the girls, through their exposure to a number of sources of information and through their lived experiences of menstruation from the point of menarche, had come to understand what menstruation was and what it meant for them.

In recalling my many visits to Kwena Molapo Secondary, I asked my participants to provide their own descriptions of what menstruation was from what they had experienced so far in their menstrual lives. Ayanda, one of the more expressive members of the group explained that:

> *it is a stage where you are years older. A stage where you are not a child anymore…you are not young anymore and that means that you need to be responsible and extra careful with yourself and your body and this is where the sex talk is introduced. So what menstruation is…its…okay let's bring in the sex first because [you'll] understand it better that way… You are now at a stage where you need to be extra responsible about your body. First, you need to always wash your body, be extra clean. You need to be careful that you do not have sex because when you have sex, you could fall pregnant. When you menstruate, it's simply saying that you can fall pregnant now. Your body is mature enough. So what this means is that you need to not have sex or else you will fall pregnant…The blood from your period, it's not the same blood. There's a lot of blood in the body and the releasing of menstrual blood is to show that you are not pregnant. You are still growing and this is what you go through as a girl.*

Ayanda's description was important in that it highlighted a number of things that appeared prominent in the descriptions and explanations that a number of the other girls shared. There were a number of aspects of the menstrual experience that she revealed that became significant themes within my research and reshaped the way in which I explored the concept of menstruation. In the explanation that Ayanda shared, she highlighted three particular shared understandings, namely; that it represented growth; that it exposed young girls to a sexual vulnerability that they need to monitor through 'responsible' behaviour: and that the menstrual act needed to be handled through certain menstrual practices of which cleanliness was most important. In different ways, each girl's explanation of

menstruation and recollection of menarche described the menstrual experience as a way in which the body cleaned and regulated itself from the inside, ridding itself of what the girls understood and continuously referred to as 'dirty blood'. In doing so, the girls associated the experience of menstruating and the menstruating body with ideas of 'uncleanliess' and 'disgust'. In our conversations, the girls shared the different ways in which their menstrual experiences had shaped what they understood about their bodies.

***Sexual socialisation***

Ayanda conveying that "you need to be careful that you do not have sex" and other variations of this statement during discussions of menarche, were particularly important expressions of the experience of being menstrual. Ideas of sexuality were prominent features of what each group of my participants understood menstruation to represent. A few of the girls may not have fully understood the relationship between their experience of menstruation and the notion of being sexual, but they acknowledged the importance of the association between the two. Although silence around the concepts of menstruation and sex was common and expressed through phrases like "we didn't talk much about it [sex]" or "my mother would never tell me about sex", mothers and caregivers found different ways in which to reinforce warnings against sexual behaviour.

During a group discussion with one of my younger participants from Kwena Molapo, the girls had a number of questions concerning different aspects of sexuality and their bodies. They explained that these were things that they were too afraid to ask their teachers and could definitely not ask their mothers because it would imply that they were having sex even if they were not. The most interesting of their questions was one from Bontle. She was waving her hand from across the classroom trying to get my attention. She then asked me to explain why she would "get wet in her panties" whenever she was with a boy that she liked or if a boy that she liked touched her. Surprisingly, a number of the other members of the group were eager to find this out as well. I explained to her that that was her body's way of showing attraction. Bontle explained that she was always a little scared when this happened to her

> *I would get wet in my panty and then think that something is wrong. My mother would tell me that playing with boys would make my period blood flow a lot, but I didn't think it would also affect me when I was not in my periods. Sometimes I'm just scared because all these things are happening to my body but I can't ask.*

The silence that surrounds these particular topics around the teenage body and sex is important for two reasons. Firstly, it draws attention to the knowledge that young girls receive about what it means to be sexual. Secondly, it highlights the different ways in which teenage girls construct ideas about their bodies, their feelings of desire, and their sexuality in the midst of all the silence. The social climate of South Africa, with the prominent presence of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and continuously increasing rates of gender-based and sexual violence, is a complex space in which to think about the ways in which young people learn about sex. An increase in inter-generational silence around aspects of sexuality is therefore problematic, considering that there is historical evidence of multiple cross-cultural practices that encouraged different levels of sexual exploration for adolescent girls and boys, through different kinds of play activities and practices like 'ukuhlobonga' (thigh sex). In a historical account of sexual socialisation in South Africa, Delius and Glaser (2002) explain that before the exploits of colonialism, African communities recognized the importance of openly exploring concerns around sexuality and acknowledging them within the adolescent experience. In the turn of the century, "these forms of sexual socialisation crumbled under the combined onslaught of Christianity, conquest, migration labour, urbanisation and Western education. The peer group pressures…now urged youth on to greater levels of sexual experimentation and helped to entrench models of masculinity which celebrated the commodification, conquest and control of young women" (Delius and Glaser, 2002: 50). This increased communication gap has left adolescent girls in particular, vulnerable and exposed to situations in which they have to navigate their own sexuality.

Education on sexuality is now an important part of the school curriculum in South Africa through collaborative work by the Department of Health and the Department of Education. To a large extent, sexuality education addresses young people's concerns and knowledge around sexual matters to educate them about the risks and responsibilities of sexual activity in the face of a growing HIV/AIDS pandemic (cf. Mkhwanazi, 2005). What is interesting is the way that this particular information on appropriate sexual conduct is shared with adolescents and in turn is interpreted by them.

In Rooth et al. (2011) Grade 10 Focus Life Orientation textbook, the section that alludes to sexuality education is titled "Development of the self in society". It discusses changing life roles, changes from adolescence to adulthood

(physical, emotional, and social), and ways of coping with change. It briefly explains that communication, particularly with an adult, is an important part of coping with change. This section then discusses 'behaviour that could lead to sexual intercourse and teenage pregnancy' and states that "to make the most out of your life, delay sexual intercourse…teenage sexual intercourse and unplanned teenage pregnancy can stop you from achieving to the best of your ability. It could prevent you from becoming who you really want to be" (Rooth et al., 2011: 176). To a great extent, teenage sexuality is treated as deviance and is expressed as such through the different ways in which my participants reported being discouraged from sex at the onset of menstruation. In different variations, the information that the girls are exposed to at home and at school, reinforces this idea. In addition, to regulate this particular deviance, the majority of my participants described sexuality as a topic that was never discussed in their households, or when discussed, it was done so with older sisters who were more open to the conversation and by mothers who strongly believed in the importance of sharing information about sexuality. With the exception of these, the discussion I developed around ideas of sexuality education at the point of menarche highlighted different cultural aspects of the silence that surround this particular issue, the most important aspect being that of 'respect'. It was an indication of respect towards one's mother to never approach her with the awkwardness of a conversation about sex and sexuality, and the mothers maintained this particular silence to safeguard the moral integrity of their teenage girls and of the family in general (cf. Delius and Glaser, 2002).

***The anxious body: (dis)embodiment and metaphorization of menstruation***

Mary provided my participants from Masibambane College with A5 booklets that they were to use as menstrual diaries as part of her work of teaching the girls to be more 'in tune' with their bodies. In these booklets, I had asked that the girls record their monthly experiences of menstruating, detailing their practices, their emotions and moods, their thoughts during this time, and other aspects of their menstruation. This particular idea was well-received, but not necessarily complied with. The girls reported being initially excited about the idea of having a menstrual diary, but very few actually entered their reflections on their menstrual experiences into the diaries. Here I reflect on the diary entries of one of my participants, Babalwa, to show how she navigated her 'anxious body' throughout her monthly menstrual experience (cf. Lee, 1994). She writes:

*Today is Saturday the 9th of August. It is the 1st day of my cycle. I feel very sick. I haven't eaten much today. I have a bad taste in my mouth and everything smells like car oil. I am also feeling a little irritated by everyone. I don't feel like talking. I have cramps in my stomach and my back. I feel like I don't like my body. I feel fat and my breasts hurt. My grandmother told me that I will feel better if I have some porridge. It usually helps. I just want to sleep.*

*Today is Monday the 11th of August. It is the 3rd day of my cycle. My flow is still very heavy. I woke up with a stain of blood in my blankets. I had to change my sheets this morning before going to school. My mother shouted at me so I'm feeling a little angry. I packed some extra pads in my bag for school so that I wouldn't stain again. I have been eating vetkoeoks and atchaar all day because I have been having cravings…My cramps are gone but I still don't really feel comfortable with my body today. I spent more time with my friends today at school and after school we went to buy 'amakota' (bunny chow). I think my period makes me eat a lot and I feel like I'm gaining weight…I have to make sure that I bath a lot today because I have a lot of blood coming out*

*Today is Friday the 15th of August. It is the 7th day of my cycle. My flow is very light now. I can wear just one pad all day. I feel more relaxed today and I'm more in love with my body. I'm glad my period is coming to an end.*

Babalwa's diary entries show how she, throughout the seven days of her cycle, relates and experiences her body in different ways. In the beginning, she describes a fragmented and disconnected experience of herself, affect by her menstrual cycle and the symptoms that are part of it. Towards the end, she expresses feelings of being more relaxed in her body as her menstrual cycle comes to an end. What Babalwa's diary entries show are feelings that a number of my participants shared within our discussions of what they thought of their menstrual experiences. Being menstrual shaped their experiences of their bodies. And the body, in its experience of being menstrual, was no longer just an object but a material expression of biology, sensation, and culture (as I will discuss in the following chapter) (cf. Csordas,1994). In each of their descriptions of what constituted their menstrual experiences, the girls shared different feelings of discomfort, anxiety, stress, self-consciousness and in some cases, moments in which their bodies were seen as problematic. Some of my participants would say "I wish I could just get rid of them [their periods]" (Lee, 1994).

The symptoms of menstruation, experienced as pre-menstrual stress, were physiological expressions of how the girls problematized their experiences of teenage girlhood through puberty. It was also an expression of how they experience the complexities of being a young woman silenced by her condition of being menstrual (cf. Scheper-Hughes, 1988).

***'Becoming a woman': personhood and the sexualisation of menstruation***

In their recollections of menarche, my participants shared, in their different stories, that the idea of 'becoming a woman' was a prominent understanding of the purpose of menstruation. Our discussions revealed that each of my participants recognized menstruation's association to 'growth'. They also acknowledged that it implied that they were to acquire a new social identity in which they were no longer children, but were seen as young women. This new social identity came with particular requirements of which the girls were expected to abide by in terms of conduct and body practices. My participants also showed that they understood the fact that they were now ascribed a sense of sexual maturation. They had learnt this at the point of their first bleed in which they were continuously instructed to be wary of or avoid male sexual contact because they now possessed the potential to be reproductive. Their menarcheal conversations that emphasized the importance of "staying away from boys," especially during times of menstruation, allude to the reality of potential pregnancy through sexual behaviour. They highlighted ideas of being susceptible to male desire. The topics that the girls repeatedly reiterated throughout their recollections of menarche also highlighted the fact that their now reproductive body was constantly being shaped by the secretive and shameful construction of menstruation. Tolman (2002) explains that when girls discuss their understanding of sexuality, these conversations reveal a:

> socially manufactured dilemma of desire, which pits girls' embodied knowledge and feelings, their sexual pleasure and connection to their own bodies and to others through their desire, against physical, social, material, psychological dangers associated with their sexuality…denying female adolescent sexual desire 'may actually disable young women in their negotiations as sexual objects. Trained into positions of passivity and victimization, young women are currently educated away from positions of sexual self-interest (Tolman, 2002: 188)

In Diepsloot, just like in the other two schools, my participants stated that they were told to ensure that they limited male contact during the time of their menstruation because the male presence would significantly affect their menstrual flow. Thembeka said "I was told that if I hang around with boys when I am on my period, I will bleed more…like the blood will be more. I don't know if it's true. But that's what my grandmother would tell me." And as the conversations around this developed, each group of participants revealed menstrual myths that were used to guide their menstrual practices. In different ways, these myths influenced the way in which they developed meanings about their menstrual bodies. Here I do not draw specifically from particular pieces of the conversations that took

place, but explore the understanding of sexuality and its relationship to menstruation, that the girls displayed throughout all my encounters with them. Reflecting on their intimate love relationships with boyfriends, the girls spoke about being responsible with their bodies and exercising significant amounts of agency in the choices they made around their bodies. Nomalanga shared that she would let her boyfriend know when she was on her period and that she wouldn't see him that week. Mpendulo shared that she was sexually active and she was always "disappointed" when her period would start because this meant that she could not hang out with her boyfriend. As the conversations developed, teenage pregnancy was recognized as a very prominent reality of all the sexual choices that they made. None of my participants admitted to having been pregnant before, but a few, like Mpendulo, confessed to being sexually active and spoke of their sexual behaviour as difficult to navigate within their menstrual experiences. After asking some of my participants to explain their relationship to menstruation now that they are sexually active, Precious elaborated on her experience. She explained that:

> *with me…okay let's say that I had sex this week, and then two weeks pass…you know that they say that if you've had sex and two weeks pass and you haven't gone onto your periods, if your periods were meant to happen that week, then that means you're pregnant. With me, every time I notice that I haven't gone [onto her periods], I buy a pregnancy test…I buy two and know that if it shows [comes out positive] then I know what has happened. And when the pregnancy tests tell me that I am negative, I wait another two weeks to see. And even then, if there is nothing, I try to see if there is anything that has changed about me during this time…whether I have morning sicknesses and stuff. If not then I'm like my periods are probably still going to come.*

Precious was a matriculant student and her explanation revealed a particular level of knowledge that she had about the process of conception. She had developed her own understanding of how her body worked and how to navigate around the threat of falling pregnant. She was aware of how reproduction worked and acknowledged the fact that her period was an important part of navigating through her sexual activity. She acknowledged, like my other participants did, that it is a common understanding that the absence of one's period usually implied pregnancy, but she knew that this was not always true. She had developed strategies to navigate this precarious experience.

A number of the other girls showed, through our conversations, that they did not have a well-established understanding of the process of reproduction or conception. Khanya in particular had stated that, "when I didn't go on my period, I would always think that I was pregnant but I would ask myself 'how' because I wasn't having sex".

She, like many others, had come to understand menstruation strictly through the threat of pregnancy and in doing so, had developed confused interpretations of their menstrual experiences.

From the point of menarche, pregnancy had continuously been ascribed negative connotations and was therefore used as a cautionary backdrop upon which all behaviour, post-menarche, was set in opposition to. And unfortunately, this was as far as most understandings of sexuality would extend. Although in the account above, Precious did not explicitly discuss how she interpreted the idea of sexual desire or express what sex meant to her or when she had started, her explanation highlighted an awareness of the biological consequences of sex and the practices she had developed to negotiate her sexuality.

My participants were aware of the position that menstruation put them in; a liminal space in which they were no longer girls and had not yet acquired the status of woman. They were ascribed a particular kind of personhood. As the girls continued in their discussions, the descriptions they provided when exploring what teenage-hood represented to them reflected gendered interpretation of menstruation and themselves. They would proudly proclaim that menstruation represented womanhood and the ability to have children in the future. They would state that "*ngizoba nomdeni*" (I will have a family) and become like their mothers. They acknowledged the fact that they had to "take care of [their] bodies so that [they] were accepted" as "good girls" and non-deviant. They had to remain 'fresh' and maintain a particular kind of 'purity'. This was the understanding of femininity that the girls had acquired from interactions with peers, but most importantly, from cultural interpretations shared with them from mothers and other care-givers.

Personhood, as described by Conklin and Morgan (1996), is an important concept to explore at this point in the way that it helps us think about how individuals are constructed. It is acquired when the social being and the human body are intertwined and articulated through different models of the body. The authors state that "the threshold when pre-social beings come to acquire social significance is a time…when sharp struggles are often over who gets to be a person, and how, and under what circumstances" (Conklin and Morgan, 1996, 658). And this is evident in the manner in which menstruation serves as a qualifying component to womanhood.

I make reference to the concept of personhood not to extend a discussion of what the authors have described as the sociocentric-individualsitic dichotomy of notions of personhood. I do so to highlight the complex ways in which the girls, through their experience and lived reality of menstruation, learned to acquire a particular social identity by engaging with menstruation as a biological event. The concept of personhood allows us to see menstruation as a significant feature of the bodily experiences of teenage girls and their understandings of self in relation to their bodies. In this understanding, personhood speaks to the way in which bodily experiences are given meaning through their engagement with the social environments in which they exist and are continuously reproduced. Menstruation is therefore framed as a dynamic expression of a reproductive self that acquires social membership through performances of femininity and established womanhood, a physical manifestation of a social value ascribed to a particular materiality.

## CHAPTER THREE

## A MENSTRUAL SELF IN SOCIETY: THE SOCIAL AND REPRESENTATIONAL BODY

In celebration of women's month in August of 2014, Mary had invited me to accompany her to a mother-daughter conference held by a church in Sharpeville. The event was titled "Bridging the Gap Between Mothers and Daughters High Tea" on the programmes that were handed out upon entering. The hall that the event was held in was extensively decorated with pink and white draping on the walls. The tables were beautifully set with white tablecloths and silver and white decorations and the chairs were covered in a white stretchable fabric. Prior to the event, we were instructed to come dressed in fancy hats to add to the event's theme. Playing the role of an assistant that day, Mary instructed me to place a couple of printed pieces of paper that had information that she wanted to share with that particular audience. I placed each paper underneath each plate on every table. These papers had information on a number of workshops about menstruation that were taking place around the country, information on books to read, and information on the washable pad and the menstrual cup as alternative menstrual products. I spent the duration of the event seated at one of the tables in the front of the hall where all the invited guests were seated. Being a church event, the invited guests were women pastors from different churches around Sharpeville and other parts of Johannesburg. The event began with speeches from youth members of the church who spoke about the difficulties of teenage-hood and the significance of their mothers' presence in their lives. As it continued, church elders were given the chance to reflect on their experiences as mothers and grandmothers and they spoke extensively about addressing the generational gap between mothers and daughters that they believed complicated the mother-daughter relationship.

The guests addressed similar topics. One of the invited church pastors, mam' Joyce, highlighted how important it was for her, and how important it should be for other mothers, to address the topic of sex and menstruation more openly. The title of her presentation was "Mothers and Daughters: The Blood Connection". She briefly and quietly vaguely reflected on her first experience of menarche and how terrifying it was because she did not know anything about it and was never fully informed. She then shared how she addressed this with her own daughters when they began menstruating, stating that she decided that she was going to celebrate this experience. She told the church

members that she took her daughters out for a family dinner to show the girls that menstruation was something to be proud of and celebrated because the girls were entering womanhood. She stated that this was important for their lives. She then added that "*kumele sikhulume nabo* (we should talk to them). *Singasabi* (we shouldn't be afraid) because we need to create a foundation of trust. They should be involved in all things. And we must be involved in all things because *basakhula* (they are still growing). And as *amantombazana, ukukhula kuyinkinga* (as girls, growing up is difficult)" (Mam' Joyce, 2014).

The event was shaped around these kinds of discussions and punctuated by references to biblical scripture, hymn singing, and a musical guest performance. After a while, it was Mary's turn to address the church audience. I stood up with a box of washable pads and another box of menstrual cups and made my way around the hall to each table handing them out for the church members to see. Mary stated right in the beginning that these products were samples that the women in the audience could purchase after the presentation if they wanted. There was a lot of excited chatter when these samples were being given out. A number of the women wanted to touch and smell the pad. They also were trying to figure out what the pad was made of. One of the ladies I was seated with playfully stated that "*usibuy'sela emuva*" (she's taking us back), referring to the washable pad as an old way of dealing with periods. Mam' Joyce appeared fascinated by the idea of a washable pad. Mam' Busi who was seated next to her was more interested in the menstrual cup and referred to it as looking like the female condom. Mam' Busi said that "*ingcono le ngoba ngijwayele ama-tampons anyway. I-pad iyashisa*" (this one is better because I am used to tampons anyway. The pad is hot). It was interesting to be seated at a table where the women spoke openly and freely about their own menstrual practices and their preferences and to hear the metaphors they used to speak about the menstruation and menstrual products. The women that I was seated with were fascinating in the conversations that they were developing. They were aware and expressive about the different ways in which they engaged with their bodies and the artefacts they used to construct their experiences.

Mary stood in front of the hall and introduced herself as an old lady who grew up in KwaZulu Natal who has come to talk to them about the washable pad. She began, as usual, with the backstory of how this particular pad came about. And in doing so, she highlighted a perceived necessity for the menstrual pad in that it addresses issues of

accessibility to resources that can help make the menstrual experience sanitary, hygienic, and affordable. She also framed it as sustainable and environmentally-friendly. Mary spoke of the pollution that disposable pads created. Mam' Busi and mam' Joyce nodded in agreement. In their chatter they reflected on moments in which they came across ravaged trash bags in the streets of their township that had been torn through by dogs during the night. They said that the sight of a used and disposed sanitary pad was offensive and vile. The disposable pads would also sometimes be found in particular parts of the township where people would illegally dump waste, and it would occasionally be seen floating in steams of water around other public areas within the township. Here, mam' Busi and Mam' Joyce recognized the transgression that the pad represented and were uncomfortable with this reality. This was how they acknowledged the idea of pollution. Put up against the disposable pad, the washable pad was an interesting addition to an already complex menstrual experience.

The washable pad was made of black cotton with stitched edges. It was designed in the shape of an ordinary disposable pad with foldable wings on the side. It had two clips sewn into the seams of the pad. These clips were used to secure the pad onto the pair of panties that it came with or onto itself if used with a different pair of panties. There were nine pads and three pairs of panties in each care pack and a number of sealable plastic bags in which to place used pads. This particular pad was created as "a response to different aspects of poverty" as described by Mary, and she hoped that it would significantly and positively influence the way in which young girls experienced their menstruation. The reason I chose to focus on the pad in my exploration of menstruation was to see what it meant for the menstrual experiences of the teenage girls that participated in my research. Throughout my fieldwork, I used the pad as a way of talking about the menstrual experience as a broader feature of teenage girls' lives.

In this chapter I discuss the use of the washable pad and the meanings that each group of girls ascribed to it. I explore the different ways in which the washable pad exposes local cultural knowledge about menstrual blood. I will also explore the many ways that the girls built ideas around their menstrual blood as a polluting, sexualised, and as a culturally-constructed substance. I suggest that the girls' use of the washable pad created moments in which they had to confront their menstrual 'waste'. In this discussion, I will draw from the work of Douglas (1966) on ideas of pollution and taboo and Conklin and Morgan (1987) on ideas of constructing a material manifestation of personhood

through bodily substances. This chapter will also explore the metaphors that girls use or have been socialised to use to think about their bodies and what these metaphors represent about the menstruating body and menstruation itself.

**Motherhood**

Drawing from my reflection on the mother-daughter event, I take a moment to reflect on the discussions that took place at the event about mothering teenage daughters. Inspired by the talks that were a part of the event, I briefly explore the way in which the mothers that presented at the event described the purpose of motherhood in the lives of their daughters. Mrs Tlou, one of the church elders, gave a presentation on things that affect the generational gap between mothers and daughters. She continuously stated that "mothers are teachers that provide their children with moral values…they should equip themselves and their daughters on how to respond to the situations of life…using prayer as an instrument of guidance…they should communicate on the different stages of growth so that daughters are not mislead by external forces" (Mrs Tlou). In different variations, each speaker reiterated the words that Mrs Tlou shared.

Lesch and Kruger (2005) highlight the significance of the mother-daughter relationship in low-income communities in South Africa, reflecting on the impact that this particular relationship has on the way in which teenage girls develop sexual agency particularly. The authors acknowledge mothers as powerful agents in the way in which young women construct their sense of self and develop ideas around their sexuality. Mkhwanazi (2014) reflects on childcare, parenting, and the way that particular ideals and practices are reproduced through persistence about values that are present in parenting. Mrs Tlou showed this in her discussion with the church members and this was later expressed in discussions that I had with my participants. Although brief, I use this reflection on the importance of motherhood to set the groundwork for the discussions that I had with my participants.

**Reflecting on waste and pollution**

The notion of pollution has been a popular feature in cross-cultural discussions about menstruation. Muller (1999) speaks of pollution in the Nazarite community. He ascribes religious connotations to the notion and explains the

competing nature of the ideas of purity and pollution, in which both attempt to create limits and boundaries "between self and other" (Muller, 1999: 66). This religious interpretation of pollution is used to ascribe certain spaces a sacred quality for the maintenance of ritual practices and setting boundaries to a particular social order. Jewkes and Wood (1999) offer their elaboration by talking about the category of "dirty wombs" as an example of the cultural manifestation of pollution in the body, a pollution expressed in local medical ethnographies in which it is referred to as "dirt" "darkness" or "heat". The authors cite Ngubane's (1977) discussion on cultural constructions of pollution by Zulu people as a medical anthropological analysis. He states that pollution, "is a mystical force with no somatic symptoms" (Jewkes and Wood, 1999: 167). Pollution as social disorder and 'matter out of place' is highly symbolic (cf. Douglas, 1966, 1972). Moreover, in the case of menstruation, it serves as a cultural idiom in which women's social status and their material nature is seen as problematic and susceptible to contamination.

In focusing on the notion of representation and symbolism in this chapter, the perceived invisible nature of waste represents things that we see as no longer our problem once they have been discarded; as matter out of sight and therefore out of mind; disposed and therefore no longer bearing meaning or significance.

The concept of 'waste' is particularly important in that it expresses the contaminating nature of women's reproductive state through their menstrual waste. Lynch (1996) discusses how waste disposal in relation to menstruation posed a particular threat to systems of waste management and affect water and land resources. Management strategies introduced from the 1980s onwards considered and included reusable products and the burning of disposable menstrual waste. Lynch alludes to the fact that it is not necessarily the idea of waste that is problematic, but the notion of coming into contact with it or it being visible (Lynch, 1996). Disposable menstrual products were appealing in this sense because they provided the convenience of 'disposing' and 'discarding' and therefore maintained the connotation of being 'waste'. This concept of waste is expressed in different ways through the menstrual practices that my participants shared in our discussions. I define waste, in the way that I use it in my thesis, as something that can be thrown away or disposed of in any particular way. I define it here to create a context for my discussion of the washable pad that does not use this notion of being disposable. It instead promotes an idea of 'reusability'; being able to repeatedly make use of the same menstrual product over an extended period of time.

These notions of disposability and reusability are particularly important in discussions of menstrual hygiene. They allow for discussions around the menstrual practices of women and girls and what cultural meanings are ascribed to them. Certain practices, such as burning, represent a sense of protection from being susceptible to foul play in the form of witchcraft, while other practices are used to maintain the idea of concealment and secrecy around the menstrual experience. These are all ideas that are shared with me by my participants.

**The washable pad**

A box of 10 light flow tampons costs R28 on average. A heavy-flow menstrual cycle requires a box of 16 heavy flow tampons whose cost ranges from R30 to R48, depending on where it is bought. Tampons are not stocked at local township spaza shops. A pack of 12 *Always* maxi pads cost about R30 in supermarkets. A heavy-flow menstrual cycle requires at least 15 pads to manage it, if changed at regular 3-4 hour intervals. The local township spaza shops do not stock the popular brands of disposable sanitary pads. The ones that they do stock are the cheaper brands that they buy from wholesalers and that they later sell with a significant mark-up. The washable pad, on the other hand is not available at any local spaza shops or at popular wholesalers and supermarkets. The different types of reusable sanitary products that have been introduced into the South African market are only exclusively available through online purchasing or, like in the case of the three schools that form my fieldwork, through sponsored donations and other forms of charity determined by an assumed need. A pack of Subz Washable Pads costs R90 for a pack of three pads and one panty. A pack of nine pads and three panties costs R120, a high amount for a menstrual product, but an understandable cost given that the pads are reusable.

The pad has gained popularity, although not commercially, through internet-based activist work and through a countless number of blog spaces and menstrual awareness chat groups that speak against the inaccessibility of sanitation facilities. These forums also address the lack of sanitary menstrual resources, limited reproductive health knowledge, and menstrual shame as a barrier to a more positive experience of menstruation. It is through these avenues that I found out about Project Dignity and Subz Washable Pads and developed my relationship with Mary. According to Mary, Project Dignity operated through sponsorship and donated funding that would be used in the

production of the washable pads. The main reason for the production of the pad was to address concerns about accessibility and availability of menstrual products for young girls in low-income areas as a way of addressing poverty. Literature around reusable sanitary products has mainly focused on issues of hygiene and sanitation. Throughout my fieldwork, I worked to expose the personal experiences that my participants had with the washable pad and the meanings that they ascribed to it. I will show this through recollections of the many discussions that emerged out of this particular topic throughout my fieldwork.

I recognized, through my many encounters with Mary and the washable pad that she developed two particular frameworks in which she wanted the pad to be understood. In all three schools that I interacted with, the pad was introduced for different reasons and set to address different menstrual concerns. In Masibambane College, one of the more resourced schools out of the three, the washable pad and the menstrual cup were introduced by Mary as alternative menstrual products that could support already existing menstrual practices. They were never spoken about as being capable to replace the disposable pad, but were rather presented as part of a larger discussion about what is available for the menstrual experience and what the experience of menstruation meant. Through the week-long workshop that Mary conducted, she extensively discussed alternative menstrual understandings and experiences by creating conversations about  the biological materiality of the female body.

In Diepsloot and at Kwena Molapo Senior Secondary, the washable pad was introduced to my participants through sponsored donations and was described mostly through a discourse of addressing poverty and providing economic relief. Mary would continuously state, as reported by my participants, that the washable pad would help the girls save money and have to worry less about how they were going to buy pads every month. In both schools, each girl acknowledged, in different ways, the significance of this particular understanding. They also expressed contrasting ideas of how they went about making decisions about the menstrual products that they used and the practices that they developed around them. A few acknowledged the economic aspect of their menstrual experience, describing how increasingly expensive it was to constantly purchase pads. In addition to this, they spoke about how embarrassing it was to actually have to go and buy the pads from local tuckshops or how hard it was to ask for money for pads from their fathers. But these were not factors that significantly affected their menstrual experiences

or practices. A number of the other girls commented on how they always found ways to buy pads and that the responsibility of buying pads wasn't necessarily theirs. And because of this, the economic relief aspect that the washable pad was based on was insignificant to them and their experiences. Each field site was based in a township setting, but all my participants represented different economic classes and this was something that influenced the way that they understood and engaged with the washable pad.

Grace, one of the girls from Diepsloot, continuously stated in her different responses that *"ngiy'jwayele"* (I'm used to it); 'it' being the disposable pad. She added that, "I can afford to buy them, even though they are expensive". She spoke of how she had been using it for so long that she couldn't imagine her menstrual experience outside of the disposable pad. It was easy and the idea of disposability made its use convenient. She spoke of the washable pad as unreliable in the sense that it didn't provide her with the comfort and assurance of handling her menstrual flow. It presented the menstrual experience as uncertain and out of her control. She added that it [the pad] wasn't long enough. She stood up and pointed to the back of her grey school trousers and said that she wanted it to reach the back end of her panty. She continued to explain that she always felt that it was going to "overflow and stain [her] uniform". These particular words were important for how most of the conversations about the pad developed. The fear of 'staining' and more specifically staining school uniforms, was common and shared. I could relate to this. Staining one's uniform made menstruation visible and apparent, most importantly to male peers. Staining one's uniform appeared wreckless. I related to this because I had, on a couple of occasions during my years in primary school, stained my school uniform and suffered the embarrassment of having to try and hide the stain by tying my jersey around my waist or attempting to find a change of clothes. In these moments, the pad had failed, just as a number of my participants expected the washable pad to fail them.

In contrast to this, there were also a number of positive interpretations and understandings of the washable pad for girls who had claimed to have continuously used it since receiving it. They found that this pad provided a level of comfort that the material of the disposable pad denied them. They said that the plastic of the disposable pad created a particular kind of heat between their thighs that made their thighs sweat when moving. This moisture, they said, would affect the adhesiveness of the pad and the throughout the day, the pad would shift and fold. On the other hand,

the washable pad was made of a black cotton material. It was soft. The fact that the washable pad was clippable to the underwear that came with it was reassuring. It would not move or shift or end up in an uncomfortable position that would allow for 'leakage'.

Simphiwe's description, while we sat as a collection of girls in one of the classrooms at Kwena Molapo Secondary, created an image of the pad as a now significant part of her menstrual practices. She described how she had figured out how to wash it and make sure that there was no residual blood or blood clots left in it. She spoke of how she would rinse it under cold running water first, and then wash it with soap before letting it soak in some hot water to "kill germs" and then letting it dry. She would clip it onto a coat-hanger and then hang the coat-hanger on one of the security bars by her bedroom window. She did this, as she explained, so that no one would see the pads, because hanging them on the washing line made them publicly visible to everyone.

The different ways that the girls integrated or chose to reject the presence of the washable pad in their menstrual lives was a display of the conscious choices that menstruating teenage girls made for themselves, their bodies, and their menstrual experiences. They were active agents within their menstrual experiences. The pad served as a platform to confront blood, blood practices, and each girl's relationship to her own menstrual blood.

**Washing blood: confronting blood myths and ideas of pollution**

As a continuation of this discussion about the washable pad, I draw on three different reflections from three girls from the different schools that I visited. I do this to show three different and popular understandings and experiences of the washable pads that were shared with me through the many menstrual conversations that took place during my fieldwork. In each reflection, what was highlighted was a confrontation of menstrual blood and related ideas about what it represented and what it meant for each menstrual experience and for menstruation as a whole.

Rejoice, in a previous discussion about menstruation's relationship to sex, described the act of menstruation as "outward" and complicated because it occurred "in the vagina". She stated that

> *At first I didn't think it [the washable pad] was a good idea because when you are using those pads at school, you take them and they give you those plastics and then you put it in there. And then when you get home that blood will be*

> *smelling. Yoh! It smells and then you can't wash it…I also feel like they are unhygienic because they can smell really bad after you [use it] because it's very hard to wash it and make it clean…after it's dry, it can smell really bad*

I knew this very well. I had many a times not attended to blood smudges on my underwear as a child, in time for me to prevent them from becoming stains. As the stain dried, it became a permanent dark-brown mark on a few of my favourite panties. Sometimes these stains would harden and feel crusty on my underwear. Dried blood was difficult to deal with. I also was familiar with the scent of menstrual blood. Growing up and learning to navigate my menstrual experience, I had also spent a few hours too many wearing the same menstrual pad because I didn't have the opportunity to change it or I didn't have one readily available. The scent of menstrual blood was sour, like something old. 'Smelly blood' was a lived reality.

Rejoice continued by stating that

> *For me, I feel like they are unhygienic, the way that they are made. Like you can get infections from them and the material it might get into your vagina and it might cause infections. So I feel like they are unhygienic.*

Kagiso commented on her experience with the pad by reinforcing ideas of disgust with menstrual blood when she stated that

> *At first I thought they were kind of disgusting. I couldn't handle the thought of me washing my own blood and touching my own blood. It's not like blood from a cut on your hand. It's blood from your vagina and it smelling. But I saw that it's very essential because somehow it is comfortable. But at first it was really like disgusting and all that… if you have a heavy flow. So obviously I thought your blood would actually come out and you'll 'blot' (stain) on your panty and it will smell really bad because it's a clot and its underneath and its hot and all that.*

What Kagiso was highlighting was a conflicted experience of the washable pad in which it stressed the material reality of menstrual blood and the fears that arose for most of the girls, when they were now expected to wash it. She understood that her body was in some way susceptible by highlighting the risk of potential infections she could get from the pad. The vagina, although mostly understood as a point of exit during menstruation, was also a described in her explanation as a point of entry as well.

Sharon, in support of what Kagiso had expressed, stated that

> *At first I thought it was disgusting, washing your own blood euw…and the cup one, I thought I was having sex with myself when I'm putting the cup inside…[but] I think it's not really that disgusting because it's your own blood. It's in*

> *you so why should you be disgusted? Even if you are saying that it's disgusting because its blood that's coming out of your vagina, how come we don't think of penises and semen as disgusting? But you see your blood as disgusting.*

Sharon's explanation was powerful in that it highlighted recognition of the different social meanings that were ascribed to the female body as opposed to the male body, particularly because of their bodily fluids (cf. Bramwell, 2001). She recognized that through thinking of menstrual blood and the vagina as disgusting, the bodies of women and young girls were framed as inherently dirty and unclean.

In different ways and through different expressions, the girls shared their interpretation of menstrual blood. The washable pad was a platform to confront menstrual blood because it put each girl in direct contact with it. In doing so, each of my participants reflected her thoughts and established meanings about menstrual blood and shared, throughout the many conversations that we had, why menstrual blood was, in different variations, considered as 'waste'.

A majority of the conversations reflected negative associations with menstrual blood because of how they had and continue to experience it throughout their monthly cycles. Confronting menstrual blood was also a way of talking about the meanings that girls developed around their own bodies and talking about ideas of purity. Sandra's reflection on her monthly menstrual experiences described menstrual blood as associated with an inner pollution that needed to be released in order for the body to regulate itself. She stated that on months when her period did not occur, she would feel unclean and that would show on her skin because she would get an outbreak of pimples. She interpreted this as a build-up of dirt within her and therefore established her cycle as necessary for releasing these impurities. Douglas (1966) stated that "dirt is essentially disorder…eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment" (1966: 2). In this sense, from the way that Sandra had understood the necessity to release her monthly menstrual blood and the way that she and many of my other participants had conceptualised menstrual blood as a self-polluting substance, she and a majority of the girls found menstrual bleeding as a way of regulating their bodily experiences. Rejecting contact with menstrual blood was a reflection of a rejection of the menstruating body. Accepting the fact that contact with menstrual blood was pre-requisite to using the washable pad was a conscious confrontation with the menstruating body as a representation of how the female

body is problematized. Engaging with menstrual blood appeared to be a way of crossing a boundary that the use of disposable pads had created, whereby the menstruating body and its substances were treated as separate from each other.

Disposability framed menstrual blood as a particular kind of waste that required management and increased concealment because the visibility of menstrual blood, through 'leakage' or 'staining', was foul and offensive. Disposability was an apparent feature in the toilet areas within the schools that I visited. Like many other public toilet facilities, there was always a specific bin allocated for menstrual waste in each toilet stall. Each bin had a lid that enclosed the smell of old menstrual pads that had not been removed yet. And in the removal of these 'waste' products, there were specific waste disposable companies hired or the waste was collected separately by the cleaning staff of the school. The act of concealment was a strong feature of the practices around the disposal of pads.

**Menstrual metaphors: representing menstruation and the menstrual body**

Menstruation was, in many ways, described as something that 'happened to the body'. I make reference to this throughout this body of work because of the different ways in which the menstrual experience was continuously understood in disembodied terms. When we talked about it in the many different stages of our many discussions around menstruation, it was expressed as "when they [periods] come", "when it happens" "when they start" "when they don't come" "when I have my period" and "when I am on my periods". This particular kind of language, drawing from the work of Martin (1987), reflected ways in which my participants interpreted their own bodies and their selves. It highlighted a "fragmented and alienated condition in which women are alleged to exist" (1987: 71). The menstrual experience was understood as separate from the body. It was spoken about in reference to the language used to describe illness. It was understood according to the severity of its symptoms and how each of the girls navigated and managed them and 'coped'. Martin (1987) states that, "what women say about their bodies forces us to look beyond…to features of the social and cultural organization of experience [and develop understandings] that can also affect body image" (1987: 76). Martin highlights that we conduct ourselves through metaphors and expressions that structure and affect the way in which we understand our bodily experiences and further develop

practices around it. Each group of girls, through the three metaphors represented below, showed important ways in which the menstrual experience was commonly described to them. These revealed, throughout our conversations, the different meanings that were shared about what menstruation means and what the menstrual experience symbolizes.

### *'you are now a woman': menstruation as a marker of growth and transition and representation of female identity*

Conversations about the point of menarche referred extensively to how the presence and existence of menstrual blood was a reflection of a new feminine identity, in which the menstruating girl was now permitted entrance into womanhood. Phrases like, "you are now a woman" or "you are now becoming a woman" were expressive acknowledgements of an embedded understanding of menstruation as a means of making the body of a girl into the body of a young woman. Moreover, menstrual blood served the purpose of representing an aspect of this acquired personhood. Conklin and Morgan (1996) state that,

> concepts of personhood are contingent on social meanings given to bodies…on how body imageries are used to create and transform social relationships…the coming into social being of a young person is intertwined with the coming into being of a young human body…the threshold when prosocial beings come to acquire social significance is a time…when sharp struggles are often waged over who gets to be a person, and how, and under what circumstances…[therefore] personhood is a social category that is inherently dynamic; people invoke certain ideas about [expressing] that both bodies and persons are produced in social contexts (1996: 657-659).

The authors, through exploring Wari ideologies of personhood, described how the idea of sociality was expressed as "processual quality" that is continuously built and rebuilt through ongoing engagements with self and other networks of people. In essence, it speaks to how the menstrual experience and the menstruating body is constructed in opposition to the non-menstruating male body, highlighting material differences as expressions of the different social roles that the female body plays and represents. Through seeing oneself as "becoming a woman," the girls were expected to fulfil this position through particular behaviours and practices during their time of menstruating.

### *'stay away from boys': menstrual surveillance and body regulations*

This expression of becoming a woman brought with it an acknowledgement of the young female body as realising its own sexual nature. In her explanation of the relationship between sex and menstruation, Sanele told me that "the way

that they are linked is that obviously when you start menstruating, you know you can have babies". Although not expressed in a metaphoric sense, the menstrual body was shaped and spoken of in relation to guidelines that regulated its behaviour during the time of menstruation. The most common ways of regulating, as expressed through our conversations, were through discouraging sexual behaviour, monitoring the management of menstrual waste, and through ensuring the concealment of the menstrual act.

One of the girls expressed that cleanliness was an extremely important aspect of the menstrual experience because concealment of the menstrual body was important. It was also a significant way of understanding menstrual substances as contaminating to oneself and others, and not meant to be detected. Sex was also expressed as a polluting act that compromised the purity of the female body. In Thembeka's previous reflection on how her mother emphasized the importance of "staying fresh", a reference to both remaining untainted and untouched by male peers and to menstrual hygiene, she highlighted that 'staying away' was important and central to discouraging sexual behaviour amongst teenage girls. It also presented an emphasis on structuring behaviour and exerting a sense of control over the menstruating body as an entity that was susceptible to invasion through sexual contact and that would result in unwanted and unplanned pregnancy. 'Staying away' constructed the body of the teenage girl as vulnerable and this vulnerability was a significant feature of menstrual experience because menstruation represented an experience of weakness for my participants.

My grandmother had continuously uttered the same phrase to me during the first few years of my menstrual experience. She would often describe how being with a boy during my periods would affect my menstrual flow, a belief that the girls and I were very familiar with. She also spoke extensively about how being with a boy would change my body physically. She said that girls who 'messed around' with boys were easy to identify because their breasts were bigger and droopy; they had thicker thighs; and they had stretch marks on the back of their legs – amongst many other identifiers. She would tell me, on days that I arrived home late from school assuming that I was out with boys, that if I were to be mischievous she would know right away. These continued warnings instilled a sense of self-surveillance within me that ensured that I conducted myself accordingly. In the same sense, the girls would continuously project similar stories about how their mothers would repeatedly state that they needed to be

responsible with their bodies now because the consequences were far greater. This particular conversation with each group of girls often led to a discussion about the complexities of the teenage experience and how it is increasingly regulated. Being responsible was the golden rule; a reiterated and significant component of becoming a young woman.

In a similar sense, Thembeka showed that surveillance was prominent in practices around handling menstrual blood. It was close to sinful to allow menstrual blood to be publicly visible, particularly through leakage and the staining of clothes, but also through how it was disposed. It is here that the washable pad is introduced as an intervention for issues around disposing of menstrual waste, as blood or sanitary products. This is the discourse that it [the washable pad] is built upon and the framework within which it exists. Dealing with the disposable pad is a laborious task. The girls spoke extensively about this aspect of their menstrual experience, recalling how they were taught to manage menstrual waste by their mothers. Thembeka highlighted that, although her mother was vague in her explanations about what menstruation is, she emphasized the many different ways in which she expected her to manage this experience. Thembeka stated that her mother stressed that the pads needed to be wrapped tightly with newspapers and disposed in a separate plastic bag so that they could be burned later. Menstrual waste was not like ordinary waste. It was full of meanings and built on a number of connotations that implied continued pollution, to self, to others, and to the environment that they existed in.

This was all an extended expression of regulating the porous menstrual body and the implications of making it and its menstrual blood visible and identifiable. Rosengarten (2000) writes about how advertisements about menstrual products use a particular language to reassure women and young girls about different levels of ‘absorbency’. This is a concept that speaks to keeping the menstruating body together. It also highlights the idea of ‘protection’ that menstrual products can provide throughout the menstrual experience, “to keep the menstruating female clean, dry, secure” from the visibility of menstrual blood (Rosengarten, 2000; 92). In addition, emphasis is offered about the protection that menstrual products provide to the menstruating woman and girl; protection against her own body and its dirt, protection against wetness. Rosengarten (2000) claims that,

> the leakage of menstrual blood mars her viability as a subject. Her very (human) being stained, a site of embarrassment, a sight/site not to be seen. The menstruating female is not merely *in possession* of a body that produces 'dirt' but, if unable to exercise constraint—a signifier of agency—she is potentially out of place herself. If she cannot manage and thereby *contain* this 'essential' aspect of her being, she is not an acceptable social being (2000: 92).

These constructed ideas about the menstruating body as being 'open' and needing to be contained, speaks to how the material nature of the body exists within tightly woven socially-produced concepts of control.

Feminist-spiritualist interpretations offer alternative understandings of menstrual blood and menstrual practices, in which control and surveillance and the use of disposable menstrual products are seen as interruptions to the menstrual experience, as acts of "hiding the reality of menstruation from the 'outer'' world" (Parvati,1978: 13). I reflect on feminist-spiritualist notions, as an extension of my discussion in chapter one, because they provide competing understandings of the menstrual experience, an imagined sense of connecting with the earth and all of its elements. This is the menstrual philosophy that Mary continuously attempted to share in her work. Through my fieldwork, I observed how my participants were not seduced by this particular philosophy. This was mainly because cultural perceptions of menstruation that had become so deeply entrenched into their menstrual lives did not accommodate such understandings. The concept of spirituality that Mary spoke of extensively did not translate into the local menstrual knowledge that the girls used to construct their experiences.

In conclusion, I have shown here that practices around blood, particularly menstrual blood, are constructed with recognition of the meanings that are attached to blood. These practices also frame the menstruating body and the menstruating woman or girl, in certain ways and ascribe to her a particular social position governed by a set of rules around conduct. The menstruating body and the menstrual experience are also discussed and regulated through the use of metaphors that highlight the menstruating body's need for governance and protection because the act of menstruating is constructed as something that creates a vulnerable and susceptible body. To a great extent, the menstrual experience brings into focus the state of women's bodies in society and shows the different ways in which young girls especially, have to learn to navigate and negotiate their precarious condition.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## THE BODY POLITIC: CONTROLLING THE REPRODUCTIVE

I decided to visit a local family planning clinic during my fieldwork. I sat in a fairly crowded waiting room for a while, waiting to be called by one of the administrative nurses at the front desk. I had chosen to go firstly as an observer of the clinic space, but mostly to participate in the anxiety-inducing act of starting a contraceptive journey. After a few moments I was asked to fill out a form that required information about my reproductive history. It asked about the date of my last menstrual cycle; the duration of my cycle; whether I had been pregnant before; whether I had terminated a pregnancy before; the number of times I had possibly terminated a pregnancy; and whether I had any children. This was all to establish a sense of what my body had been through since the onset of my 'reproductiveness'. The waiting room continued to fill up as I waited. A few minutes later my name was called and I was fetched by one of the clinic's nurses, Nurse Ruth. I followed her into her office on the far end of a long corridor. I was extremely nervous about this entire experience, but after being in the midst of another distressing menstrual cycle, I felt compelled to seek medical assistance.

When we were in the office, I began our encounter by stating that I had very problematic periods and that I was looking for a way to deal with them. I had explained to the nurse that I heard that contraceptives were sometimes helpful in 'treating' the symptoms of menstruation and that I wanted to know more about what I could possibly do. Being in this clinic space was, in some sense, an extension of my own medicalised understanding of the menstrual experience and my belief in medical interventions as ways of coping with it. Throughout my menstrual experience, I had developed a strong dependence on a variety of pain medications that I would immediately begin consuming at the slightest sight of my menstrual blood, in fear of the severity of my menstrual cramps. In coming to the clinic, I was hoping to find a more effective solution to my grief.

Nurse Ruth pulled out a couple of pamphlets and asked me if I had any previous knowledge about contraceptives and if I had any particular preferences in terms of the contraceptives I wanted use. I explained that I was unsure and that I was only familiar with oral contraceptives from friends who were currently using them. She then explained that there

were injectable options as well; one that could be taken every two months and another that could be taken at three-month intervals. She was quite vague in the information that I expected her to provide me with and focused predominantly on explaining the injectables. Nurse Ruth pointed to one of the pamphlets and began to explain one of the injectable contraceptive options, creating a discussion about a drug called *Petogen*. She pointed to it on the shelf behind her. It was a white liquid substance in a very small bottle with a blue label on it. She explained that this particular contraceptive was a hormonal contraceptive, a form of progesterone, which is a female hormone that helps with the regulation of the process of ovulation and with menstrual periods. It would thin the lining of my uterus so that menstruation or menstrual bleeding would not occur. I was unaware that this was possible. She continued her explanation by adding that "but there are a few side effects". I had expected to hear this. She said that I should expect some weight gain and a few spells of moodiness or slight depression in the first couple of weeks of being on the contraceptive. She added that I would experience irregular bleeding and have a brown discharge for a few days or a couple of weeks as my body adjusts to the hormone, but my body would eventually stop menstruating.

I asked her, at this point, if this method of contraceptives was popular amongst other user, specifically teenage girls. She replied by stating that the choice is ultimately theirs at the end of the day on what method they feel most comfortable using, but it wasn't something that she would personally recommend to young girls because she believed that it was necessary for them to go through the experience of having a menstrual cycle before deciding to "get rid of it". She explained that the injectable contraceptive was convenient and that that was its appeal. As the conversation developed, she stated that there are a range of contraceptives that are usually recommended for teenage girls that are implemented to decrease unplanned pregnancies, and these are usually very long term interventions that come in the form of implants that would last up to five years. She explained that she usually recommended these to first year tertiary students because of their increased sexual activity within their tertiary schooling environments. She said that being away from home provided the girls with a sense of freedom to do whatever they wanted, and their unregulated sexual freedom usually resulted in a number of unplanned pregnancies. The use of contraception was a way of managing their unregulated and unmonitored sexual freedom. She expressed that "sometimes young girls

find it quite hard to be responsible with their bodies because they are exposed to so much, so sometimes contraceptives can be used to protect them from the consequences," referring to unplanned and unwanted pregnancy.

As our conversation continued to develop, Nurse Ruth explained that contraception is not meant to affect my fertility. She then added that, with the injectable contraceptive that I had chosen, I should expect delayed fertility for the first few months when I discontinue its use. "Your body will need get used to not having the hormone in you anymore and this may take a while, but it also may not because all bodies respond different," she explained. A few moments later, I was standing bent over the bed she had in her office, with my pants and underwear lowered in anticipation of the injection.

As my visit ended, I grew more and more anxious about what to expect once my body had started adjusting to the contraceptive drug. I tried to imagine what my cycle would be like now and whether my use of contraceptives would provide any particular relief to the dread and anguish of my menstrual experience. Nurse Ruth provided me with a clinic card which she explained that I would use to keep track of my appointment dates; possible changes in my menstrual flow; any concerning occurrences; and to record the gradually shifting experience of my menstrual cycle. I have had one more injection since this initial visit. I do not bleed anymore, excluding moments of occasional spotting. And with the clinic card, I found myself being indirectly expected to participate in the regulation and monitoring of my body, its altered fertility, and its menstrual cycle.

In this chapter, I explore the menstrual experience in a much broader sense by discussing different kinds of surveillance that the menstruating teenage body experiences in relation to its fertility. As this chapter develops, I show the different ways in which young girls, through their experiences of menstruation and teenage girlhood, are subjected to (and also subject themselves and their peers to) regulation and control through their bodies. In turn, they become what Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) defined as 'disciplined'. In doing so, I explore two particular ways in which teenage fertility is constructed and managed. The first is through the impact and influence of contraception on ideas about sexuality. The second is through maintained systems of social values and morals that dictate how teenage bodies, from the point of menarche and beyond, should be conducted. I make particular reference to teenage

pregnancy to aid my explanation. By beginning with the notion of contraception, I look into the history of contraceptive use in post-Apartheid South Africa as a way of discussing the body politics that exist around women and young girls' bodies, especially those from the black population. In essence, I show that culturally-constructed ideas about the menstrual experience, as expressed by the participants in my research, suggest that passivity remains a very prominent feature of the menstruating body and of teenage girlhood.

The personal story I provided above was meant as a reflection of my own experience with menstrual suppression (cf. Sanabria, 2009) as a recently significant part of my menstrual journey. It was an expression of what Scheper-Hughes (1988) referred to as the mystification of medicalisation, in which my own medicalised interpretations of my menstrual experience created a belief and trust in the 'magic of medicine'. I take from this that the attractiveness of medical technologies such as contraceptives provides a space in which we can talk about control and agency and explore the ways in which different understandings of the menstruating or reproductive body are developed, maintained, and integrated into young women's social lives. In this discussion, I draw upon Scheper-Hughes' conception of body politic "referring to the ways in which the body is manipulated as a public object, and how individuals and populations are regulated and controlled within specific political economic relations of production and domination" (1988: 431).

Although it wasn't initially part of the work that I set out to do in my fieldwork, and wasn't explicitly expressed as something that the girls actively and continuously participated in or openly admitted to during our conversations about their menstrual experience, a discussion on the use of contraceptives was useful in thinking about the way in which the menstruating body and its experience of reproduction are defined and interpreted as medically-constructed biological phenomenon that required different kinds of 'management' interventions. I anticipated that these 'interventions', whether used or not, in some way influenced the way in which young girls, my participants in particular, understood and experienced themselves as social beings in a structured system of morals and values.

In the discussions that I conducted with the girls from Masibambane College and Kwena Molapo Secondary, each group of participants expressed their understandings of contraceptives. They spoke of it as associated with increased

sexual behaviour. Very few of them had ever imagined contraceptives as possible menstrual interventions and had never heard of them as being able to relieve some of the symptoms of the menstrual experience. The girls who chose to actively engage in this conversation saw contraceptives as a marker of sexual activity and understood them to be something that they were discouraged to use because of its association to sex and in some cases, as Thembeka expressed during this discussion, promiscuity. Thembeka reflected on how, like sex, contraceptives were "something you couldn't just talk about with your mother. Your mother will think that you are now fooling around with boys." In her description, contraceptives appeared to have been ascribed a sexual connotation that made discussions about it taboo.

It was difficult to initially create a discussion about what my participants understood contraceptives and what they meant. I was later introduced to a young girl called Lerato. She was the older sister of one of my participants, Sanele, from Masibambane College. During our very brief discussion about contraceptives, Sanele had suggested that I speak to her sister stating that she (Lerato) was currently using the pill and could probably tell me more. Lerato had just become a first year student at a local college. I met her one afternoon at a taxi rank in her township after she had arrived back from one of her afternoon classes. She was a short and bubbly individual wearing a bright pink dress with long black tights underneath and brown open-toe sandals. Our conversation was fairly brief but Lerato managed provide a enough detail about her own experiences with menstruation.

We began the conversation by discussing what made her decide to make use of contraceptives, and she explained that over the years, she experienced very severe menstrual cramps; so severe that often times she contemplated removing her uterus, she expressed humorously. Contraceptives appeared to be a less permanent solution to her monthly anguish. A friend of hers had then informed her about a pill she could take that would probably help her with period pains and decrease the length of her menstrual cycle. Lerato was enticed merely by the idea of a painless period, but had always feared the rumoured side effects of using 'the pill' such as affected fertility and severe weight gain. She explained that "I'm already chubby, so the idea of possibly gaining weight was terrifying", but it was a solution to her pain and that's all that mattered. She explained that the contraceptives, and what they do, were explained to her and a lot of the myths around contraceptives were clarified, but they were still things that she

believed in. She said that her biggest concern initially was weight gain because it was the most apparent signs of contraceptive-use, but she told herself that this was something that she would find a way to control. She explained that at every visit, she was weighed and her blood pressure was checked and monitored to make sure that the pill wasn't affecting her health in any way. She described this as an "added benefit" because she felt like she was no longer the only one responsible for her health. She said "I liked that because it became more than just about my period". As she continued with her description, she explained that her experience with the nurse was complex. She stated that "you know how blacks are. She [the nurse] was kind of judgemental. She kept emphasizing that I should still use protection and that contraceptives do not prevent HIV". She laughed. Lerato explained that the nurse's attitude was judgemental "because of that black thing that they have. She [the nurse] is trying to be protective and act as a mother. They like to act like mothers and that's why we are scared to go to the community clinics, because it's worse there…my friend went there and she said it's worse."

She continued by telling me that she has been on the pill for almost two years and the pill had drastically changed her menstrual experience. She said

> *it made me enjoy it [her period]…because it made it go from a five-day week of hell to only two or three days and the flow was lighter and I didn't have any pains. Now I've reached a point where I am scared when I don't have my pills. I make sure that I get them in advance because immediately when I stop and I go on my periods, the pains will start again. I have a fear of that pain.*

Lerato revealed her established dependence on the pill to regulate and make her menstrual experience bearable. She continued by explaining that now that she was sexuality active, she felt as if being on the pill influenced her sexual behaviour as well. She said that "I don't condomise…what had always been my biggest worry was just the idea of falling pregnant…I'm not prepared for it." She explained that she stopped using a condom because her and her boyfriend had decided that they didn't need condoms anymore. She said "I knew I wasn't going to have a baby so I didn't need condoms." Lerato described pregnancy as a more immediate threat than that of contracting an STI of any sort. She understood that she was at risk of this by not making use of condoms, but she justified her actions by stating that "I trust him [her boyfriend]". After discussing her use of contraceptives with her boyfriend, she explained that it was her boyfriend's idea to stop using condoms because they were "unnecessary."

I had asked her if her mother knew that she was using contraceptives and in response she explained that her mother had gone through her belongings one day and found them in her room. Her mother then encouraged her aunt to talk to her and advise her about condom-use. Lerato expressed how disappointed she was in the fact that her mother did not respect her privacy. She said that she had then asked her aunt to relay the message to her mother that the pills were being used for her problematic periods. She explained that her relationship with her mother did not allow for conversations about menstruation and sex. She expressed that "we don't speak about such things because my mother feels like she's going to be promoting me to have sex".

This particular part of Lertao's story revealed a reality that a number of my participants expressed, namely, a fragmented sense of communication between mother and daughter because of the fact that sex and sex-related issues were considered taboo. The discussion continued with Lerato sharing her personal thoughts about what teenage girls understand about contraceptives, stating that it was something that was never discussed so as girls, they were quite misinformed about its uses. She reflected on her years in high school and what her thoughts about contraceptives were at that time:

> *I thought it was definitely not for me because I wasn't having sex at that point, although I started in matric. That's how I understood it back then, as something for people who are having sex. What I thought about girls who were using contraceptives was that they were active [sexually]…for me it was just associated with sex. It represented something very different then. It was almost like a taboo. I knew a girl who was using it for skin problems and we were all shocked about it. We thought that she was lying and hiding the fact that she was having sex. It was like getting to another level where you as a teenager you're not supposed to be there…It was like dating a guy with a car, you see? You're just not supposed to be there, but when you are there it's the most fascinating thing. So we did not know what contraceptives looked like and how they operate. We all wanted to know 'what does it feel like?' 'what's the reaction in your body?' and things like that. We knew that we could only find out from the clinics but the clinics were always described as scary places. I think the girls in my school just had a lack of information, because every now and then there would be an abortion story. I mean, we never had conversation about our vaginas and we were never really told that these were the options available to us.*

Lerato continued by talking about the presentations that took place in her school hall where invited guests, usually ambassadors from *Lil let* or *Always*, would come and do demonstrations and act out scenarios that they felt reflected young girls' menstrual experiences. During these presentations, the ambassadors would explain how the pad or the tampon would help them. Lerato however expressed that her school was lucky because other schools never had this, so she wondered where the girls got their information from. She added "I mean, they would tell us about it in class

and sometimes you'd have a friend that knew more than you and you would discuss with your friends, but I don't think we knew everything. Even with the pill, they should have told us." I agreed with her on this. Information about contraceptives was never shared in high school. Instead we were taught to fear the idea of sex through graphic presentations about STIs and other sex-related diseases. Contraceptives and all things related to the act of sex all equalled pregnancy. Lerato expressed that she had always understood pregnancy to be some kind of sin or taboo and the pill was a way of protecting herself from that taboo. She added that "they don't want us to know about the pill because they think it will make us have sex, but they also in a way want you to use it because then you can prevent this taboo…so it's very complicated. I don't know what they want. But now that I'm using it I feel protected, so its fine."

My conversation with Lerato was fascinating in that it revealed the many different ways in which she navigated herself and the choices she made for her body, through a social climate in which the teenage body and its experiences or ideas of sexuality were problematized. She highlighted three particular themes: the taboo of teenage pregnancy as a significant part of the social and reproductive lives of teenage girls; the complicated use of contraceptives as an idea of protection and regulation; and ideas about agency and reflections of teenage sexual knowledge and sexual practices through the concept of contraception. I discuss these three themes more broadly, reflecting on the conversations that I had with my participants throughout my fieldwork and drawing from established local literature about these particular topics.

**Regulated bodies: the historical context of contraceptive-use in South Africa**

At this point, I begin by defining the menstrual experience as a reproductive event whereby the female body encounters "medicine, [culture] and politics [as] closely intertwined" (Scheper-Hughes, 1988). With this statement, I imply that, with reference to South Africa, contraceptives as medical interventions have been and still are, in a very significant way, artefacts of socio-political use, representing culturally-influenced local knowledge about the production and maintenance of the female body.

Historically, South Africa's apartheid-era policies had significantly affected the social realities of women resulting in a lived experience of inequality in terms of accessibility to reproductive health resources. The writings of Burgard (2004) add that these particular policies were significantly influential to women's use of contraceptives and revealed racial patterns of use. Burgard explains that

> Apartheid-era policies of separate and unequal development by racial groups exerted conflicting forces on women's use of modern contraceptives…racial segregation also influenced the availability and quality of family planning services for non-whites, because they were administered separately by health services specific to each racial group or homeland. The apartheid government became increasingly interested in reducing the numerical dominance of the black population, however, and aggressively promoted family planning for black women from 1970s onward, greatly enhancing their access and the access of other women to modern contraceptives (2004:92).

Burgard argues that the policies of apartheid shaped the ways in which women came to understand modern contraceptive use, even post-apartheid, explaining that during the apartheid era, policy promoted increased reproduction in the black population in order to grow an inexpensive labour force in the country's homelands. But overpopulation soon became a recognized threat and population growth could not be continuously supported, therefore introducing an increased promotion of family planning to reduce birth rates particularly amongst the black population. The introduction of the National Family Planning Programme in 1974 integrated family planning into all public health services and increased the popularity of contraceptive use amongst black women who sought out modern methods to control their fertility. This later became an effort to promote, through 1984's Population and Development Programme "social and economic development of underdeveloped groups" done through the increased accessibility to contraceptives that had no real effect on the existing social and economic inequalities that framed black women's daily lived realities. Patterns of contraceptive use fluctuated through time because of the influence of geographical segregation, limited access to economic opportunities, isolation from service providers, the male labour migration that affected contact with sexual partners, and increased adolescent sexuality that would result in women being "at greater risk of premarital fertility which increase[d] their desire to use contraceptives" (2004: 94). In addition, "the large proportion of female-headed households in rural black areas heavily affected by labour migration under apartheid meant that women increasingly had control over economic and social decision-making, including reproduction, giving them more latitude to choose to limit their fertility" (ibid). What Burgard describes is a

continuously shifting understanding of contraceptives and the social meanings that are attached to it over time. The work of Stephenson, Beke, and Tshibangu (2008) offers the same exploration of contraceptive use in the Eastern Cape, expressing that the adoption of contraceptives is continuously influenced by several factors that reflect the "the community climate of female autonomy" (2008: 841).

Contraceptives have since been understood as serving the purpose of managing social and individual bodies and promoting particular politically-constructed ideas of reproduction and fertility. In the same way, I interpret the washable pad to be doing much of the same work, managing bodies through ideas of hygiene and a conscious engagement with the concept of reproduction and fertility. In having used both of these menstrual interventions, I have managed to understand the idea of the body, my own body included, as a medium of negotiation. With this, I refer to the many ways in which my participants and myself, through our discussion of the menstruating body, have acknowledged through our conversations, that our bodies exist in a complex socio-political space in which we own our bodies and their experiences and in which we are slaves to our bodies and the social and morally-constructed networks in which we live in.

Our introduction to the washable pad, my participants and I, had aided us in orienting ourselves in this complex socio-political space, and helped us acknowledge the fact that we exist in a state of continuous negotiation, with ourselves, our bodies, and society. Although the washable pad and our engagement with it did not explicitly implicate our ideas of sexuality, we acknowledged its attempt to integrate itself into the reproductive lives of young girls, to establish a sense of alternative menstrual 'management' and to frame the body and bodily experiences such as menstruation, as things that could be controlled and regulated. I draw on my experience with contraceptives and the girls' understanding of contraceptive use to highlight the concept of control and regulation of bodies (individual and social) (cf Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987). With this, I show how the reproductive teenage body is an expression of a particular kind of established docility, in which being controlled or managed represents acceptable social integration. Ideas about the washable pad and about contraceptives are complicated spaces to think about fertility and the experience of menstruation because they simultaneously highlight ideas of 'manageability', 'regulation' and 'docility' while representing 'agency,' 'menstrual consciousness,' 'access' and 'empowerment'.

**The docile body: 'ukupriventa' and the protection and control of teenage sexuality**

My discussions about contraceptives were not particularly extensive because a majority of my participants reported that this was not something that they had begun to use yet. They knew of it though and continuously called it "ukupreventa" (to prevent). Most of the girls, through the many talks that we had, reflected on obtaining their knowledge of contraceptives from peers who had heard about them or from peers that were using them. There appeared to be no formal relaying of information about contraceptives and their use in school or at home, but it was a described as a very real component of teenage menstrual lives. As Lerato expressed in her above-mentioned story, contraceptives and sex-related concerns were difficult to openly discuss because of fears of encouraging sexual behaviour through such open conversations. The girls understood contraceptives and their preventative nature in very vague ways and, through providing descriptions of what they thought contraceptives did, they highlighted their own ideas of prevention and how the sole purpose of these understandings was to be able to prevent the occurrence of teenage pregnancy. From their descriptions, the use of contraceptives was continuously discouraged because of its association to sexual activity.

Salumi, one of my participants from Diepsloot, described girls that used contraceptives as "*amantombazana ajahe izinto*" (girls who rush into things) referring to an early onset of sexual activity and in a very obvious sense alluding to the idea of promiscuity. She then added that, "*siyababona* (we see them) because suddenly they gain weight. That's how you can tell sometimes. People talk. The girls won't tell you that '*bayapreventa*' (they are preventing) because they know that people talk. So maybe they just shouldn't do it" discouraging the use of contraceptives. This piece of the conversation then ignited an interesting discussion about the choices that young girls make for their bodies. A number of the girls continuously stated that "people aren't the same" and that "you must do things that are comfortable for you and your own body because it's yours". Some expressed the fact that "what you do is your responsibility" while other girls added that "girls must respect themselves", creating a colourful debate about choice and agency and the influence and significance of Christian-influenced systems of morals and values. The notion of 'respecting yourself' highlighted ideas about Christianity and sexual shame that Delius and Glaser (2005) provide a historical perspective on. The authors acknowledge how teachings about sexuality were significantly influenced or

silenced in “Christianised African households striving for respectability”. It is these moral conceptions of girlhood that many of my participants reflected throughout our conversations, alluding to the idea of being a ‘good girl’. This interaction with my participants from Diepsloot was particularly interesting in the way in which the conversation that developed used the fear of teenage pregnancy and the sexual beliefs that they had created around it as a way of talking about responsible girlhood and appropriate behaviour. These discussions also appeared to frame teenage fertility as influenced by a number of social values and norms. In our interactions, the girls performed and participated in these stigmatized, socially-constructed and controlled ideas of what the implications of their sexuality was.

Tolman (2002:16) in discussing teenage sexuality and ideas of desire, explains that “social hierarchies are premised on gender and produce social constructions of proper female sexuality and appropriate gendered behaviour for women”. This is seen through the different ways in which my participants indirectly expressed how they policed each other’s behaviour with ideas of being ‘responsible’ and ‘respecting their bodies’. Through this, the girls continuously constructed and reproduced an imaged ‘good girl’ image in which they needed to aspire to be able to participate in an acceptable experience of girlhood that is maintained by the gendered norms around the notion of femininity. The ‘good girl’ was docile and passive and did not acknowledge herself as sexual or having desire. The ‘good girl’ was a socially constructed and embodied idea of a particular kind of femininity that was performed through their bodies and through their behaviour “I response to particular expectations about what is appropriate, normal, and acceptable female comportment, appearance, and sexuality.

My conversation with Lerato, that I used to introduce the discussion of contraceptives, was a particular display of choice and agency in relation to ideas of teenage fertility. She consciously decided to make use of the pill to initially ‘manage’ her menstrual cycle, but later to participate in handling her fertility and regulating her experience of sexuality. It is also a display of the sexual beliefs that young girls develop in order to deal with their sexuality. Believing that condom-use in conjunction with contraception was “unnecessary”, of which Lerato acknowledged as a naïve way of handling her sexual body, highlighted misinformed ways in which young girls learn to monitor and navigate their sexual behaviour (cf Mkhwanazi, 2010). In Lerato’s understanding, her sexual practices were all

developed to avoid her fear of pregnancy, which would identify her as being sexually active and 'irresponsible'. Throughout her two years of use, her experience with contraceptives significantly influenced not only her menstrual experience, but her experience of her body in terms of her understanding herself as reproductive and sexual, an aspect of her girlhood that is continuously denounced and regulated. In this sense, '*ukupriventa*' (to prevent) can be understood as a cultural idiom and expression of regulated teenage sexuality and developing desire and protection of teenage 'reproductiveness', teenage fertility, and culturally constructed ideas of femininity.

**The susceptible body: the experience of teenage girlhood in a culture of teenage pregnancy**

Teenage pregnancy is an extensively researched aspect of South African teenage-hood. It has become so deeply rooted in the experience of teenage girlhood that it has become almost synonymous with it. Literature on teenage pregnancy has explored its links to risky teen sexual behaviour and HIV/AIDS, making it a particularly important feature of the teenage experience. More importantly, the onset of menstruation and the realisation of the teenage girl as developing in her sexuality make teenage pregnancy an even greater social reality. Teenage pregnancy alludes to concerns around the sexual behaviours of young girls, their sexual knowledge, their understanding of fertility, their value systems, reproductive health knowledge, social constructions of girlhood, all of which are realised and prioritised from the onset of menstruation. In a sense, teenage pregnancy can be seen as continuously produced menstrual reality. I use teenage pregnancy at this point in my thesis to talk about teenage girls acknowledge and monitor ideas of desire, how they navigate through their knowledge of sexuality and how the stigma around pregnancy is used as a tool of control and surveillance.

In a review of teenage pregnancy in South Africa, literature revealed that, in term of policy around issues concerning teen pregnancy, the country "has a relatively progressive legislative response to teenage pregnancy and motherhood." Emphasis has been placed on acts such as *The Choice on Termination of Pregnancy (CToP) Act (No. 92 of 1996), The South African Children's Act (2005), The Sexual Offences Act (2007), and The South African Schools Act (SASA) (1996)* in which the lives of teenage girls are prioritised and the reality of their reproductiveness is acknowledged and protected. However, these policies are always interpreted and influenced by community values

and morals. They are filtered through individuals' views on teenage sexuality and interpretations of gender norms, creating barriers to effective implementation (Partners in Sexual Health, 2013). Prevention of pregnancy as a moral transgression, according to Jewkes, Morrell, and Christofides (2009: 675-676)

> stems from an understanding that [it] pose[s] health, educational and social risks for young women…[and] their subordinate position in the gender and social hierarchy constrains their ability to make real choices around pregnancy…positioning the focus of teenage pregnancy on gender has implications for policy…it shows how the position of women has resulted in the devaluing, under-resourcing and often prohibition of health services that specifically confer on women the opportunity to control their fertility.

It is important to acknowledge the reality of teenage pregnancy as an occurrence that is significantly influenced by perpetuated gender norms, taboos around sex and sexuality, and maintained gender inequalities. In this way, it is easier to recognize the fact that surveillance on fertility is a means of protecting the "disintegration of society" (Ibid). The continued presence of sexual violence in our society "conveys important messages to young women about gender power dynamics and their limited ability to exercise agency" (Ibid: 679).

Throughout my discussions with all my participants, pregnancy was continuously understood as an immediate reality of the menstrual experience. The girls described, through their different recollections of their menarche and the knowledge that they received from their mothers and other care givers that teenage pregnancy contained a sense of being a taboo and it was this aspect of the menstrual experience that regulated the teenage body. Pregnancy was presented as a feared aspect of the teenage experience, especially in relation to menstruation. The different interpretations that each group of girls shared with me were justified by a need to be "more responsible" throughout their teenage years to show "growth" and "maturity". The girls spoke of their teenage experiences and ideas of what teenage-hood meant and represented through descriptions of teenage pregnancy as a particular kind of deviance. Mpho and other participants from Masibambane College, were particularly expressive about their understanding of teenage-hood, stating that

> *it's a stage where you are 'finding yourself', where you 'come to realise who you are'…it's also a stage where you experiment with different kinds of fun… but the difficulties with being a teenage girl are faced when it comes to taking responsibility for the decisions that you make and trying to figure out right from wrong. We are not like the boys. They can do whatever they like, but when you are a girl, you have to act a certain way, and treat your body in a certain way, because if you are not careful you might just end up pregnant and that's bad. At this stage, a lot of things influence us and sometimes we don't know what the right thing to do is, so being a teenage girl is good and bad.*

There are two things that are important about the way in which Mpho described teenage girlhood. The first being the fact that she recognized by stating that "we are not like the boys" that the experience was gendered and controlled by particular gender norms, morals and values that were significantly different from those of her male peers. The second thing is that, through understanding her experience as constructed through gendered systems and norms, Mpho expressed that the consequences of not operating within these gendered norms and not "treat[ing] your body in a certain way" or 'not [being] careful' would be pregnancy. Mpho therefore presented the fear of pregnancy as a regulating aspect of her understanding of teenage girlhood. Throughout my visits to Masibambane College, many of my conversations about the teenage experience revolved around this particular idea of 'the good girl' and were expressed through a number of interesting interpretations of what it meant to be a teenager. Mpho's friend, Sindisiwe, stated in agreement with Mpho's interpretation that

> *being a teenager means that you must have fun but you must not rush into adult stuff…it's a stage whereby you have to learn about life…and even if you have fun, you must limit this fun because it can get you into trouble…it's a time where you learn that you will meet different situations where you'll need to be more responsible with your body especially.*

And in discussing ideas about what womanhood meant, Sindiswe's interpretation of her transition was laced with ideas about motherhood stating that

> *becoming a woman means that you can now be a mother because you have a womb and that womb is supposed to bring life. Women play this important role, but some of us start this too early. So what I've realised is that being a teenager and becoming a woman means that your choices will always have consequences that affect your life. If you make these mistakes [falling pregnant] you will have to live with that mistake forever.*

The girls, through their descriptions, could not separate their understandings of teenage girlhood from gendered ideas of femininity. To them, being a girl, being a young woman, being menstrual, being fertile, all implied that they would be one day become mothers, performing and participating in constructed gender roles and continuously reproducing gendered understandings of femininity.

In addition to this, the concept of "staying away from boys" that was continuously emphasized through the onset of the girls' menstrual lives had become so tightly woven into their understanding of themselves as social beings, so much so that it has shaped their interpretations of girlhood through negative associations towards teenage pregnancy. Citing the work of Preston-Whyte (1991) in Mkhwanazi (2010), teenage pregnancy in black and coloured

communities “represented a route for upward social mobility…because the cultural value paced on childbearing as markers of femininity meant that early childbearing provided a way for a teenage girl to show that she was fertile and to demonstrate ‘successful womanhood’” (Mkhwanazi, 2010: 347). Although all my participants recognized the importance of fertility in their interpretations of menstruation and their ideas of womanhood, they saw early childbirth as a mar on their conception of girlhood, referring to it as a “mistake”, as something that is rushed into, as “adult stuff”, and as a something that reflected irresponsibility with one’s own body. Through their understandings, fertility was a problematic aspect of their girlhood experiences.

Teenage pregnancy presented itself as a form of regulation within teenage girlhood experiences. The interpretations that Sindisiwe and Mpho shared were representations of a shared understanding amongst my participants which reflected a particular kind of consciousness about the reality of early childbearing and the role that their menstruating bodies played in constructed ideas about pregnancy. But it also highlighted the many significant ways in which the social construction of teenage pregnancy was a regulating factor in their experiences of girlhood. It revealed the fear, anxieties, and vulnerabilities that young girls are exposed to through ideas about their bodies, their menstruation, and their sexuality. This is, in essence, an extension of the idea of surveillance that young girls are exposed to throughout their menstrual lives, and in a more broader sense, a comment on the different ways in which teenage fertility and ideas around it are managed. From their descriptions, my participants were made aware of their fertility and the vulnerable state in which their menstrual selves were existing in. This was done mostly through vague discussions with care-givers but more prominently through conversations and interpretations of their social selves from peers, in which they understood themselves to be more susceptible to the taboo of early childbearing if they did not act accordingly.

Contraception therefore presented an interesting moment in which teenage girls allowed themselves the opportunity to explore their sexuality, as reflected in Lerato’s story, without the consequence of falling pregnant. But the maintained fear of possible pregnancy and the stigma that it brings, as expressed by my participants, discouraged their engagement with the notion of contraception, and instead exposed them to the vulnerabilities around sexual behaviour and uniformed sexual beliefs.

## CONCLUSION

> *"Menstruation matters. And so do the ways we talk about it, write about it, and illustrate it"* (Bobel and Kissling, 2011: 121).

I use the quote above as a reflection of the work within this study. Through engaging the participants of my research in their understanding and experiences of being menstrual beings, exploring socially-constructed ideas of the female body, and understanding women's reproductive nature as political, the girls managed to show the various ways in which their menstrual lives were continuously influenced. Speaking about gender norms, recognizing aspects of gender inequality, and engaging each other about issues around teenage sexuality and sexual behaviour as constructed and significant aspects of teenage girlhood were all ways of showing that menstruation indeed mattered. And using the washable pad aided an exploration of continuously changing menstrual practices and expressions of menstrual blood as complex and political and part of a growing exploration of body consciousness.

It is important to understand the significance of what girls are taught about menstruation, what menstruation means to them, and how this affects the relationships they have with their own bodies and selves. Throughout this research, the teenage body played an important role in becoming a platform on which multiple aspects of girlhood intersected. These menstrual discussions allowed for open conversations about being sexual, about relationships, and about learning to navigate through different interpretations of the menstrual experience. They also helped all of us talk about different expressions of menstrual knowledge. Reflections on menstrual practices and taboos helped to highlight different kinds of shared knowledge, different kinds of developing cultural practices around menstruation, and the influence all of these have on each girls' menstrual journeys.

The conversation about menstruation was clearly a very important one to have in that it allowed for particular kinds of questions to surface. Through these open menstrual discussions, the girls that participated in my research were able to interrogate knowledge that they had acquired and developed for themselves through their menstrual journeys. They were also able to relate with each other on the myths about menstruation that they had come to use to navigate

their bodies and the washable pad was a significant part of that. Being put in direct contact with the different ideas about their femininity through seeing, touching, and washing their menstrual blood allowed the girls the opportunity to explore what menstruating meant and what it looked like. It allowed them to acknowledge their own socio-economic positions in relation to their need for the washable pad and to recognize the important role that different menstrual products and menstrual technologies play in their own personal menstrual journeys. In a broader sense, discussions about menstruation through their encounters with the washable pad allowed the girls to understand and define their own bodies as problematic spaces in the social environments that they exist in. The girls recognized and acknowledged the gendering nature of their menstrual experience and were aware of how their menstrual bodies exposed them to a number of sexual vulnerabilities and feelings of disembodiment and disempowerment.

The washable pad appeared to be a teaching tool; a means to create a more aware and enlightened experience and understanding of menstruation. Its presence and use created a different level of understanding about the experience of menstruation and along with it came different menstrual practices that opposed the idea of disposability. This was a difficult concept for my participants to accept because of their understanding of menstrual blood as a material representation of inner dirt or waste. Using feminist-spiritualist teachings as a method of encouraging more engaged and enlightened menstrual practices was an interesting reflection of the meanings that are created around menstruation and, by extension, sexuality and sexual maturation.

The act of menstruating or the experience of menstruation rather, through engaging with the participants in my study, appeared to create a particular kind of consciousness or awareness about the female body as material, political and existing in a complicated set of social rules.

During our discussions, my participants and I had come to learn a lot about each other and a lot about what it meant to be a young woman. We shared fears and made ourselves vulnerable to the thoughts of others. We also discovered our similarities. Our menstrual experiences were not necessarily the same but our conversations revealed much of the same concerns that we had about our bodies and the complexities of girlhood and young womanhood.

It was evident that the girls were very aware of the influences that existed around them. Family, friends, boys, and school all formed part of the beliefs and values that they used to talk about themselves and their bodies. They were also aware that their menstruation meant something. And that in coming to terms with their menstrual selves they exposed a number of things that made them vulnerable. Menstruation became a platform, a moment through which they recognized themselves as both active and passive beings. They were active in the choices that they made around menstrual products and the menstrual practices that they developed thereafter. And they were passive in the sense that menstruation exposed them to regulated ideas about their bodies and behaviour.

My research has shown that menstruation is a biological event signifying maturation and growth with powerful cultural and socio-political expressions. Through its relationship with the washable pad, it is seen as something that girls actively engage in, through reproducing and maintaining culturally-constructed blood practices and ideas of regulated femininity. It is also something that young teenage girls perform through their ideas and practices of sexuality and expressions or non-expressions of desire.

The combination of lay beliefs with biomedical models of the menstrual experience allows us to reflect on the body politics that are significant in the construction of menstruation as an experience. According to the knowledge shared by Lerato, who made use of contraceptives, and knowledge shared by girls who didn't use contraceptives, fertility was an important understanding of menstruation but it needed to be 'managed' biomedically or through the use of moral systems and gendered norms. In very different ways, and through the various kinds of shared knowledge and reflections on the menstrual experience from my participants, menstruation was a representation of self, society, and the political economy in which both existed.

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