

# HOW THE PATRIARCHY

promotes menstrual shame, or . . .

## Women of the world, flow in solidarity!

BY KIMBERLEY WHITCHURCH

**R**EMEMBER WHEN YOU WERE ABOUT 12 YEARS old, and got your period for the first time? On one hand it was a relief that it Finally Happened, and there was no small feeling of accomplishment to have visible proof of one's burgeoning womanhood. Tampax! Kotex! Midol! A real excuse to avoid gym class!

But there was also the shame of it. Your mother was probably furtive about the whole thing, implying that dad and your brothers were not to be let in on your new secret. They had to be protected from that gruesome part of your female identity...god help them if ever they were exposed to the actual sight of your blood. Or the odour!

So if you used pads of the non-flushable variety, you wrapped them into elaborate little pupae of toilet paper before stowing them at the very bottom of the wastebasket. You worried constantly about whether anybody could tell you were wearing anything. You especially worried about...accidents. If you ever got blood on your clothes, you'd absolutely die of shame! You'd leave town! The world would very likely end!

Advertisements in *Seventeen* and

whatever else you were reading certainly contributed to this attitude. They always seemed to stress keeping That Time of the Month a big secret. Deodorant tampons...to eliminate the slightest possibility of tell-tale odour. Tampon and pads individually wrapped in plastic, to 1) ride inobtrusively in your little purse and 2) be hygienically sealed, pristine until the very moment of use. The instruction folder with the tampax pointed out the sanitary nature of their product, saying that "your hands need never touch your body." Heaven forbid that your 14-year-old fingers ever should touch anything Down There.

It's sad how many women are still subtly (and even not so subtly) led to believe that their genitals are smelly, messy, and ugly. Did you feel repulsion the first time you looked at yourself with a strategically-

placed mirror? Or did it strike you as a wild, red, exotic area? I'm thinking of Alice Walker's female character in *The Colour Purple*, describing a friend's vulva as "like a wet rose."

The dewy-eyed girls in the slick magazine ads confide breathlessly about that extra-special feeling of freshness, of confidence, that whatever product they are wearing gives them on the day of the big presentation, the day the boyfriend's parents are met, and so on. Come to think of it, there's something vaguely icky about feminine hygiene ads in general. I always feel talked down to. At least the execrable FDS can, and the reasons behind it, has disappeared from the magazines. And most of our shelves.

The whole issue I'm trying to point out is that our attitudes about our bodies, our reproductive functions, have been shaped in a manner which is ultimately convenient for the patriarchal system. To be ashamed of one's body is to lack strength. It's about losing power. There are times when you can feel so good about your sexual identity, about being a woman, and it feels like power running in your veins. Sexual power. You just can't experience that if you've been convinced that your genitals are so disgusting that a man couldn't possibly enjoy the sight of them...or the taste.

I am not suggesting that you proudly swing a tampon by the string on your way to the washroom. It's no more the public's business at large than the state of your sex life.

It's more like suggesting that we don't bury our early warning training in the care and upkeep of your attitudes. What did mum tell you when she first described menarche? Do you still believe it? If you got blood on the back of your skirt one day, would you be mortified...or no more concerned than if you got a nosebleed? Question those early attitudes. Think about shame, embarrassment, and sexual power.

And remember, women...war is just menstruation envy.



Illustration by Kimberley Whitchurch, Dalhousie Gazette

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