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### The Importance of Menstruation in the Life of a Modern Woman: A Literature Review

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#### Abstract

This paper analyses the cultural, social, ritual and medical aspects of women's menstruation and gender issues in Lithuania. It examines how menstruation was taboo in historical times, hidden and emphasized as dangerous, magically symbolic states. The menstrual period was associated with impressions of impurity and magic, and its meaning was often conveyed through ritual actions, such as slapping the face or magic spells. The analysis draws on ethnological and folklore material, examines the concept of menstruation in traditional culture and its symbolic

reflection, including the smell of blood and magical practices. It also discusses how modern social and educational changes that reduce the taboo on menstruation are changing attitudes towards women's biological processes and bodily cleanliness. One of the most important conclusions is that the experience of menstruation was often accompanied by fears, secrecy, and shame, and its ignorance and taboo have persisted to this day, although modern phenomena and education seem to be reducing these social and cultural barriers.

**Keywords:** Menstruation, Menstrual Blood, Menstrual Cycle, Education

#### Introduction

Gender issues and their research in Lithuania is a relatively new and rather limited area, in which ethnologists P. Dundulienė, A. Vyšniauskaitė, A. Čepienė, R. Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė, R. Paukštytė-Šaknienė, Ž. Šaknys have been more actively interested in recent decades. Research in this area often focuses on cultural gender specifics, basic social and ritual aspects, such as children's games, gender-based work, social roles in the family. However, one less studied and still debated issue is the meaning and social context of a woman's menstruation as a biological and cultural phenomenon. In traditional Lithuanian culture, menstruation was often shrouded in taboos, hidden information, and magically symbolically viewed as a dangerous or even unclean area (Račiūnaitė, 2002; Balikienė, Navickas, 2006). This paper discusses both the cultural aspects of menstruation and its symbolic meaning, and also emphasizes the influence of concealment and taboo on this topic on a woman's social and psychological life. The analysis presents ethnological and folklore material, discussing the meaning and taboo of menstruation not only in the context of traditional culture, but also in contemporary social challenges related to reducing menstruation taboos and education.

#### The Significance and Changes of the Woman's Life Cycle in Ethnological Research

Cultural gender specificity was examined by describing different games played by boys and girls and the first gender-specific tasks *"A child identifies with his parents: for a girl, the ideal woman is mother, for a boy, father"* (Račiūnaitė, 2002), the topic of the division of labor by gender, men's and women's clothing, and family life. Menstruation as a phenomenon of the female cycle is a topic that has not been studied much in Lithuanian culture. There are various reasons for the lack of research, but one of the main ones is the existing cultural custom, or even more precisely, the prohibition – people avoided talking about menstruation, making it public, because it was considered indecent and unethical *"intimate area"* (Račiūnaitė, 2002, p. 85).

The guardian and patron of the hearth has always been a woman, but at certain stages it was forbidden for them. Pranė Dundulienė states that the fire can be polluted by a group of various "offenders", namely "unclean women" – a woman during menstruation, a pregnant woman who is expecting a child and a woman after giving birth, who is "unclean after childbirth" for

40 days until the initiation into the church is performed. She emphasized that *"fire polluted by such women is very vengeful and dangerous to people"* (Dundulienė, 1991, p. 33) [12].

Žilvytis Bernardas Šaknys studied girls' first menstruation in the context of youth maturity and initiation rites (Šaknys, 1996). *"During the interwar period, girls were accepted into the youth community at approximately 16.32 years of age, and boys at 17.94 years of age. Both girls and boys had to be able to cope with daily tasks at home and on the farm"* (Šaknys, 1996, p.3). According to Root (2002), it is stated that rituals distribution according to gender took place according to 5 stages whether types. Types 1 and 2 - legalized only girls' puberty. Excluding type 1, which refers to rituals practiced in the family. The ritual takes place after the first menstruation, because it is associated with the beginning of the girl's physical and social maturation process. Only the mother and daughter participated in the rituals. The mother, having learned about her daughter's first menstruation, would slap her in the face. *"After the first menstruation, the mother would slap her in the face so that it would "turn red", believing that it would be fair and pink"* (Šaknys, 2002, p. 175), a similar case was recorded in the 1950s of the 20th century. When the girl first got her period, the mother slapped her in the face *"He hit not very strong, but that "frightened", it is a birth secret disclosure rite, but it has already disappeared.* Such ritual practice was carried out with the aim of determining in advance the physiological development of the girl. It was believed that even the way of slapping could determine the duration of menstruation. Type 2, the rite of baking the first bread is associated with the physical and social maturation of the individual. The belief that when the first menstruation begins *"the baker's peel must be urgently taken out to the hallway"* and that's about its approximate age, when during happened first menstruation and first bread baking, overlapping, translating to do the assumption that physical maturity celebration rites once upon a time was united management institutions beginning. Magical practices involving menstrual blood, such as pouring it into a boyfriend's drink to attract him, are also recorded. These customs indicate that menstruation had not only biological, but also symbolic and magical significance in traditional culture (Šaknys, 2002) [25].

Rasa Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė's "Woman in Traditional Lithuanian Culture" is considered the first monograph dedicated to female gender studies, which names only one gender - woman and female gender culture. The identification of a woman took place through the customs and traditions of the human life cycle, and special attention was paid to the significance of a woman's birth cycle. Female gender - girl, woman, mother. For a girl, the concept of motherhood was formed not only by the mother or family, but also by the entire community. This stage - from girl to girl - passed gradually. A girl up to 14 years old was considered a shepherdess, at 15 - a half-girl, and from 16 a girl was a "girl" and this meant not only physiological, but also social maturity. According to the author, the age of menarche (first menstruation) of rural girls born in the late 19th century - early 20th century was 15.44 years, later studies record 14.17 years for those born in 1910-1920, other authors state 14.88 years for 1900-1920, 14.95 years for 1935-1944, 14.34 years for 1947-1950. We can see a gradual decrease in the age of menarche in the late 19th

century - early 20th century - 15 years, later - 14 years, and at the end of the 20th century - 13 years. Rasa Račiūnaitė analyzes the ritual importance of the first menstruation (menarche) - it is interpreted as entering a new social status and is accompanied by cultural actions or taboos. The physiological maturity of girls was reflected in rituals that took place in the family with the participation of the daughter and mother, sometimes the grandmother. The mother usually waited for her daughter's first menstruation and called this moment "blooming in time". She boasted about it not only to her neighbors, but also to her father and grandfather. It was a sign that it was possible to start collecting a dowry. However, there is also a less pleasant menarche than physiological maturity a moment of confirmation, which sometimes involved symbolic or even frightening means of asking the question, "What have you done here?" after seeing blood stains on the bed, and "slapping her across the face," which was done once, or three times, and sometimes across both cheeks, believing that her daughter would be beautiful, red, pure, healthy as she is now and would get married in time. As the author states, the presenters remembered the circumstances of their first menstruation well, often even the approximate dates, but most of them knew nothing about menstruation before their first experience, so they *"experienced mortal fear, panic, and horror."* Daughters learned information about menstruation from their mothers only in isolated cases during the interwar period (Račiūnaitė 2002, p. 84). During this period, women were also prohibited from performing even ordinary household chores: "not attending church", "picking apples in the garden because the trees would not like apples", "knitting a net", "sitting on a horse", "picking cabbage, sowing vegetables, making sausages" and performing other tasks "in order to protect the environment from the "harmful" influence of menstruation" (Račiūnaitė 2002, p. 87). Račiūnaitė also mentions the magical significance of blood *"which was lured by pouring menstrual blood into the tea or vodka that the boyfriend was drinking."*

Cultural issues of reproduction, preparation of girls for motherhood, gender reveal, customs of relatives and village midwives in the family and rural community are examined by ethnologist Rasa Paukstyte-Šaknienė. Analyzing the functioning of social control of various institutions in the areas of sex education and pregnancy regulation, she distinguishes several parts: analysis of attitudes towards sex education, attitudes towards family planning, peculiarities of attitudes towards pregnancy control measures, attitudes towards childless families. She states that in traditional rural culture *"from the moment of sexual puberty until the end of reproductive powers, the behavior and decisions of girls and women were controlled by the family (parents, brothers and sisters, spouse), distant relatives and tribes, neighbors, village and town communities, confessional community and the state"*. When a mother had a daughter, she knew very well what the "girl's fate" would be (Paukstyte, 1999, p.36), and tried to wean her a week earlier than boys and always on Sunday. The mother protected her daughter and taught her to protect herself: before the first menstruation began, the girl would be taken to church on the feast of the Immaculate Conception and, without her knowing, the mother would pray and ask beggars to pray "for that intention". The topic of sex education was taboo and was rarely discussed not only among themselves, but was also

*hidden from the children, everything related to the birth of a baby or other "feminine matters" was hidden from them.*

Lithuanian ethnologists speak about menstruation in a limited way, more through the relationship between the traditional family and the rural community, the customs of youth maturity, their significance for the family, and through the significance of reproduction and becoming a mother.

The topic of menstruation and its meaning, the meaning of the smell of blood and the perception of menstruation, menstrual blood spells and curses in Lithuanian traditional culture are examined in "Menstruation in Lithuanian Culture" (Balikienė, Baranauskaitė, Navickas, 2006) [4] based on collected ethnographic and folklore material. The authors delved into the traditional concept of menstruation, the physiological maturity of girls and young women and customs related to the first menstruation; introducing girls to the first phenomena of physiological maturity; the duration of menstruation, the magical properties of blood, prohibited works during menstruation and signs indicating the end of menstruation.

Menstruation as a cultural phenomenon is surrounded by numerous folk beliefs and practices. Perhaps the most direct analysis of traditional Lithuanian culture's images and concepts of menstruation and its fluid, blood as a component, was conducted by Monika Balikienė and Vytautas Navickas (Balikienė and Navickas, 2013). Culturally, menstrual blood was called "bad blood", and the smell was seen as a "threatening and mysterious magical substance" (Balikienė and Navickas, 2013, p. 241). Menstruation was considered a ritual state of "impurity", accompanied by taboos, restrictions and various fears, and the smell of the menstrual cycle had a magical and dangerous meaning. Norms of control over a woman's body and strong cultural regulation prevailed. The cultural taboo surrounding the smell of menstrual blood has persisted to this day, especially among older women: "the traditional concept of menstrual blood requires absolute silence on this issue" (Balikienė and Navickas, 2013, p. 251), but more open conversations, youthful enthusiasm, and education in the public and educational institutions are changing established norms. Much attention is paid to the smell of menstruation as a culturally stigmatized aspect. Menstrual blood is considered "bad blood" – a threatening, magical, unclean substance, the smell of which is perceived as disgusting, degrading, and contagious. Smell is taboo, the presenters talk about it reluctantly, but indirectly (through stories about the kitchen, bathhouse, garden) reveal its meaning – it contaminates food, spreads diseases, reveals a woman's menstrual condition. Women talk about hiding menstruation, eliminating odor, and the lack of hygiene products. Some remember that blood simply flowed through heels, absorbed into skirts, and modern hygiene is perceived as "paradise". They examined the attitude towards spells and magic related to menstrual blood. Menstrual blood is a great tool for bewitching men, and a practice known in Lithuania is to add a few drops of blood to tea, coffee, drink, beer or a stronger drink or other liquid squeezed from your used pad, less often - to food: soup, scrambled eggs or pancakes., *I heard a lot. They add a few drops to beer, whiskey - so that the color is not visible. They do this out of a strong desire for a man to fall in love with them.* " The consequences can be tragic: a handsome, intelligent young man becomes dependent on an old woman; an exemplary husband and

father leaves the family. Frequent and negative physical consequences – for example, serious illnesses. Such relationships with a "seduced" woman are usually unsuccessful. Removing spells is difficult – the recorded techniques are rare, dirty and risky. This is confirmed by the ethnopharmacologist Tauras Antanas Mekas, who stated that the use of menstrual blood for the purpose of bewitching men is the most common form of love magic in Lithuania (Mekas 2002: 192) [19] and the ethnographic material collected by Balkutė and Amelia Urbiene. Secret spells on menstrual blood were more often used to break up a marriage, seduce, possess, enslave a strange man or even bewitch him, rather than for love purposes. However, blood spells were also used to save a marriage. *"The mother-in-law really wanted to save the marriage and suggested that her daughter-in-law use used pads to "flavour" the tea.* " There was also a non-linear blood spell technique called "monthly chemistry" burn blood-stained clothes, and add the ashes to tea or sprinkle them where the man sits or lies. Body fluids and even sweat were used for magical purposes, *"they wear sugar cubes in their armpits so that they absorb sweat, they also give them to the man with a drink"*. Perhaps the question arises whether one time helps? This answer is not specific, because for some a few drops of magic or a single use is enough, while for others it needs to be repeated every month, especially during the full moon (three times in a row). The beginning and end of the menstrual cycle were also significant and a unique provision was recorded: "if you want love to be short-lived - use blood from the beginning of menstruation, and if you want a man to love you for life - use the last day's clear discharge, no longer bloody".

The modernizing world wants to get rid of the taboo issues of menstruation and in the publication *A Vicious Cycle of Silence. Ending Period Poverty in the UK (2013)* discusses how the established cultural and religious attitude of society creates a vicious circle of silence. This prevents young girls and women from receiving sufficient and appropriate information about menstruation and hygiene products. Girls face physical, emotional, social and academic difficulties, and face situations where they do not have hygiene products. Many are even ashamed to seek and ask for help, and the education system contributes little to providing knowledge in school curricula, especially in educating boys. The report of the publication analyzes the relationship between menstruation and gender inequality, since only women and girls experience the menstrual period. The document emphasizes the need to recognize menstruation as a natural physiological phenomenon, provide all young people with knowledge and hygiene products, and reduce social exclusion among poor families who do not have the opportunity to purchase measures and to destroy cultural established taboos.

### **The Significance of a Woman's Life Cycle from a Medical Perspective**

The menstrual period is often marked by secret language signs among girls, young women and women, such as "days", "cousin from Raudondvaris", "mencės", "menzes", etc. This language helps to alleviate discomfort and improve communication, as menstruation is often seen as an unpleasant or unacceptable phenomenon (Laws, 1990) [17]. Often, silences or symbolic signs are used instead of precise words, such as "began" or "already", which indicate social or psychological discomfort. Such methods of concealment

are closely related to cultural taboos, shame and the need for concealment associated with menstruation (Williams, 1983) [30].

Over the past century, there has been a trend towards a younger age at menarche, with menarche now often occurring at 9–10 years of age, compared to an average of 16–17 years (Brooks-Gunn and Petersen, 1983) [9]. One reason is that lifestyle and dietary changes are causing the body to develop more rapidly, and girls often strive to conform to the societal ideal of a slim and fit figure, often by restricting their diet (Brooks-Gunn and Petersen, 1983) [9]. Early puberty is also triggered by childhood trauma, family conflict or parental loss – for example, girls who have lost their fathers mature more quickly (Surbey, 1990) [26].

Early or late menarche can have a significant impact on girls' psychological well-being. Based on the hypothesis that delayed puberty and life events can lead to emotional distress (Simmons & Blythe, 1987), girls who do not mature according to expectations often feel isolated, experience low self-esteem, and may experience depression or behavioral problems. In addition, early puberty is often associated with lower academic achievement, earlier sexual initiation, and greater psychological distress (Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1982; Moffitt *et al.*, 1992) [10, 21]. Late puberty in adolescence may have the opposite effect, protecting against depression (Brooks-Gunn, 1992).

Biological puberty occurs at younger ages, but psychological and emotional development often lags behind physiological changes. As a result, many girls feel misunderstood and unprepared for these changes, which increases the risk of depression, low self-esteem, and eating disorders (Ge, Conger, & Elder, 1996) [14]. Therefore, providing information about menstruation and body changes is crucial, as the first experience is very sensitive and can have a long-term impact on the formation of girls' self-esteem.

In Lithuania, the main source of information about menstruation is usually the mother, who is the main authority and the first source of knowledge about body changes. The mother's attitude and openness can strongly influence the girl's attitude towards her biological changes and body changes. A positive attitude encourages the girl to identify with the model of a mature woman, while a negative one can cause psychological stress and shame (Menke, 1983; Danza, 1983) [20, 11]. In addition to the mother, older sisters, friends or environmental influences are also important, who can maintain or, on the contrary, strengthen the taboo and sense of discomfort.

The topic of menstruation is often surrounded by various taboos that influence the attitudes of girls and women. First, the concealment taboo (Laws, 1990) [17], which means that menstruation should be kept secret, avoiding any signs that would indicate bleeding. Second, the activity taboo, which limits physical activity during menstruation in order to avoid being “dirty” or setting a bad example, so women often avoid sports, swimming or other active activities (Britton, 1996; Houppert, 1999 [15]). Third, the communication taboo, which prohibits talking about menstruation in public, especially with members of the opposite sex, which often leads to a lack of knowledge and feelings of insecurity (Williams, 1983; Kissling, 1996) [30, 16].

In modern societies, there is increasing openness and awareness about the importance of menstruation as a natural

and normal physiological process (Liepinaitienė *et al.*, 2023) [18]. More and more educational programs and public discussions reduce the feeling of shame and encourage open conversation about a woman's biological changes. The availability of knowledge and hygiene products allows to reduce taboos and create a healthier attitude towards women's bodies (A Vicious Cycle of Silence, 2013). However, some traditional beliefs still remain, which underpin social patterns of norms and behavior.

## Conclusions

1. A girl's menarche - her first period - was rarely explained within the family, and was often a source of fear and shame. At the time, ritual acts such as slapping her face marked the physiological transition to womanhood.
2. In traditional Lithuanian culture, menstrual blood was considered a magical, dangerous substance that could affect the environment or even human health.
3. Menstrual experiences are not neutral – they are shaped by historical, social and cultural context, and inherited shame still persists.

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