

In a sophisticated age when
almost anything goes,
women are still being taught to deny
their monthly menstrual cycle

Is menstruation still the forbidden topic?

By Janice Turner
TORONTO STAR

Back in 1978, feminist Gloria Steinem had an intriguing thought: What would happen if men could menstruate and women could not?

Menstruation, she mused, would undoubtedly become an enviable, boast-worthy event.

"Men would brag about how long and how much."

"Young boys would talk about it as the envied beginning of manhood. Gifts, religious ceremonies, family dinners and stag parties would mark the day . . .

"Sanitary supplies would be federally funded and free. Of course, some men would still pay for the prestige of such commercial brands as Paul Newman Tampons, Muhammad Ali's Rope-a-Dope Pads, John Wayne Maxi Pads and Joe Namath Jock Shields — 'For Those Light Bachelor Days.'"

"Statistical surveys would show that men did better in sports and won more Olympic medals during their periods."

But, alas, it cannot happen and menstruation — a sign of life and womanhood — remains largely a forbidden topic.

Most women refrain from talking about it in public. If it is talked about at all it's mostly in code words — "I've got my 'friend' (read 'enemy')"

— and in whispers.

Although she may not always feel quite herself, a woman is expected to act "normal" rather than concede her body is going through any kind of change.

"She is bleeding and she will get tired, but life today doesn't allow for that," says Eileen Edmonds, a nurses

studies lecturer at Queen's University. "Women still try to keep up with the rhythm of the day, even when their bodies may be telling them to relax."

The women in menstrual product ads swim, dive, ride bicycles and dance in skin-tight leotards. Nice thoughts for some, but where are all the women in loose sweats curled up with a good book?

Tamra Salton, director of the California-based Menstrual Health Foundation, says more women should use the time for introspection, as an opportunity to pause and take stock.

That doesn't mean feeling ill or necessarily weak, although that's perfectly reasonable. Salton notes that many women actually report feelings of strength and well-being, and increased insight.

For women who suffer from premenstrual syndrome, for example, the onset of monthly bleeding often brings enormous relief.

One woman compared it to feeling "like a bird let out of a cage."

But all too often, says Salton, women tend to dissociate themselves from the experience, to deny that it is happening.

Menstruation is still mostly thought to be an unpleasant experience, something a woman must work to free herself from.

"We teach young girls at a very early age that bleeding is dirty and shameful," says Salton.

"They're taught not to talk about it, don't trust it and don't allow yourself to have feelings about it."

Menstrual product companies try to outdo each other with new and

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AD CAMPAIGNS: Magazine ads (at right) and television commercials for feminine hygiene products often depict women in strenuous, demanding activities.

TRUST
It's the comfort of a smooth cardboard applicator with a rounded tip.

It's called the Tampax Comfort Shaped Applicator. For some very good reasons. The smooth cardboard applicator has a gently rounded tip which makes it extra comfortable and easy to insert. It's shaped like a plastic applicator, but it's made of cardboard, so it's flushable and biodegradable. All of which makes Tampax Comfort Shaped Applicator Tampons a very comfortable choice, indeed. For a free sample of Tampax Comfort, write to TAMPAX, Tampax, PO Box 418, Monticello, MN 55660-4184.

TRUST IS TAMPAX

It's natural to feel uncomfortable about tampons.
Sure, you might feel a little nervous about using tampons. It's a new experience. But if you're used to having your period, you're old enough to know tampons are a natural choice.

Now Playtex offers the first slender size tampon with a comfortable plastic applicator.
Playtex offers a slender size tampon with a comfortable plastic applicator. It's a new experience. But if you're used to having your period, you're old enough to know tampons are a natural choice.

Always introduces a contoured pantliner for comfort on the move.
Which pantliner looks more comfortable to you?
NEW! Always Contour Pantliner. SoftSoft are designed to stay put, no matter how you move, thanks to 40% more adhesive coverage, extending edge to edge. So they're less likely to shift, bend, or even tear. And unlike some liners, they're soft and still, thanks to their amazingly flexible design with its exclusive SoftSoft fabric.

In addition to their all-over adhesive, SoftSofts are made with you flexibility in mind. Always Contours are soft and shaped to fit the part of your panties. So it's no wonder they're so comfortable, you can hardly tell they're there.

NEW! PANTLINERS WITH SoftSoft
New contoured comfort for women on the move.

Garden's tale a flowering of the spirit

Sometimes the women's movement seems like a torrent of change, sweeping through the century, dislodging boulders, transforming the social landscape. But it also moves in gentler ways, meandering through private lives, stirring the pebbles, ruffling up the bed of the stream and then running clearer.

There's a garden in a quiet corner of Mount Pleasant Cemetery that has a story to tell. And part of that story is the way the women's movement has eddied through Mary Elizabeth Smith's life and helped to clarify it.

Mary Smith, a soft-spoken mother of three from London, Ont., is the creator of a lovely children's garden in

Michele Landsberg

Section 33 of the cemetery, near the Moore Ave. fence. She made the garden in memory of her infant son, who died 30 years ago after living only five days.

Authority — male authority — dealt with the death of that baby. In its omniscience, it took all power, control and knowledge out of Mary Smith's hands, slammed the door benevolently on her questions and left her to stifle her grief for a quarter of a century.

As a young wife who had grown up in a large rural family of nine children, Mary wanted a big family herself. But she suffered through five consecutive miscarriages before she gave premature birth to Harley Kerr Smith.

We sat in the shade of a beech tree near the children's garden as Mary told me the story.

"I'm a strong believer in a woman's right to make her own decisions. But when the baby died after only five days, my husband and the doctor decided that I couldn't handle it."

"When I said to my husband: 'We have to plan the funeral,' he told me it had all been taken care of. He showed me the death certificate — it didn't even have the baby's name. It called him the 'infant son of Harley Smith.' I was told I could never know where he was buried, that he'd been put in the coffin of a woman so he could have a Christian burial."

"I don't blame anyone, then or now. The doctor told my husband this was best for me."

But the vanished son was to haunt Mary for 30 years. After her three children were born, she lived in perpetual anxiety that they would be harmed or would disappear. She secretly followed them to school; her nights were vivid with "horrific nightmares" about children being snatched away.

False story

A few years ago, Mary told some close friends about her unresolved grief. "The worst was that I didn't know where he was. I couldn't go stand on the spot."

The friends were shocked by the patently false story about the burial in a woman's coffin. Within five days, they had traced Harley Kerr Smith to his unmarked grave in this secluded corner of Mount Pleasant Cemetery. In the grass, barely visible, are a handful of tiny paving stones set flush with the earth, marking the spot where stillborn babies, and those without known parents, used to be buried.

Mary, who works at the Memorial Boys' and Girls' Club in London, remembers "the very difficult day" when she drove up to Toronto alone and visited that anonymous place. Over the next year, she spent hours talking with a retired Anglican minister, and gradually began to plan the children's commemorative garden that would help her lay one small ghost to rest.

The garden, designed by a friend and planted by Mary's own hands, is understated: a crescent of sweet woodruff carpeting the earth, Christmas ferns, high bush cranberry, a serviceberry bush, hostas nodding their mauve bells on slender stems. They're all native plants — Mary Smith is a past president of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists.

Three pink and rippled granite boulders from Northern Ontario are nestled into the flower bed. On one is a small, touchingly intimate bronze sculpture of a little girl, skirt flying, playing leapfrog over the bent back of a boy. The statue, called First Flight, is by Dundas artist Juliet Jancso.

"I wanted children to be the focus of this garden," Mary explained, her gaze lingering on the leaping form. Once she had found and bought the sculpture, she kept it on her bedroom dresser for months, watching the moonlight touch it into uncanny life.

Another boulder carries a plaque that tells Mary's story and explains that the garden represents both her "victory over death" and a memorial to all the children buried there.

Mary feels that her life has been transformed since she was able to come to terms with her old grief. "I don't cry any more. The bitterness is gone." She hopes that other women who connect with her story will see the garden as their own, a green place of growing things, an oasis of calm and reflection.

With the best will in the world, all-male traditions don't always know how to reckon with women's heartaches and losses or how to acknowledge the most important passages in a woman's life.

The children's garden at Mount Pleasant Cemetery is a loss redeemed, a wrong set right, and a flowering of women's power to create and to choose, both in the public realm and in smaller, more private ways.

Newcomer discovers paradise has its price

In China we have a saying: "There is a full moon abroad."

It means life can be great there.

Hundreds of thousands of our people, mainly intellectuals, have poured into Canada, the United States and other Western nations.

I am part of this continuing stream.

On the night of July 29, 1990, as the airplane from Beijing descends into Pearson International Airport, I am thrilled by the millions of lights bright as diamonds.

It seems as if all the stars have jumped from the sky to welcome me.

"Oh, I begin my new, wonderful life in the new country in the New World,"



GU
ZHENZHEN

I think cheerfully. For years I had prepared for this day.

The "honeymoon" passes quickly. Then I begin another long journey.

This is a materialistic society. It is quite different from the one I left. Here, money is crucial.

To save money to pay for my tuition, for the first time in my life I have to babysit in someone else's home. I prepare breakfast, pack lunches, cook dinner, feed the dogs, put the kids to bed, load the dishwasher, do the laundry, sweep the floors . . .

For me, a magazine editor, the adjustment is difficult.

There are tears in my eyes. Some-

times I am scared and just don't know where to go. It's as if a thick mist hangs everywhere.

In my mind I want to stay, but in my heart I wish to return to where I belong. I think about how complicated life is.

What has happened to me happens to many newcomers.

A manager becomes a waiter, a reporter delivers newspapers, a writer washes dishes in a restaurant, a professor sells flowers in the street, a photographer works as a cook's helper.

Their talent is sacrificed. It is depressing.

Canadians ask me the same question over and over again: "Why did you come here in the first place?"

"Because we all want to achieve a dream and because we believe that with hard work things will get better," I answer.

The constant isolation is another major problem I must confront.

Having left loved ones behind, I've felt so lonely for a long time. I have a strong desire to make a real friendship.

One night, after hours of deadly silence, suddenly my phone rings! The ringing is the most marvellous sound I've ever heard.

I pick up the phone and am astonished to hear a guy speaking Mandarin Chinese with a precise Beijing accent that is familiar and dear to me.

He also comes from Beijing and is a friend of a friend of mine.

We talk a great deal, eagerly, as if we were best friends rather than complete strangers.

After this, my phone rings musically every day, usually in the middle of the night. It makes me happy. I begin to understand there is nothing sweeter in life than the human touch.

"You must be careful. He has acquired the name of chaser-after-girls," people warn me.

"After my girlfriend left me, the old

me died," he tells me. "Now I am just an empty shell. I will never again take girls seriously."

I try not to care. I need consolation, so I don't want to face the truth.

I follow him everywhere. To restaurants, movie theatres, city hall, the immigration office.

I am a companion, an interpreter, a teacher, a secretary — like others before me. Before long, I am completely exhausted.

None of the books I have bought for my courses have been read. I am lost. I feel even lonelier and more deserted than before.

But I can't help it. We cling to each other. If we had stayed in China, both of us know very well that it couldn't be like this.

It takes me a year to get rid of the co-dependency — an unhealthy relationship. After that, my sorrows disappear and my courage is reborn.

I continue to pursue my life's goals. I am found. I understand I am the only one I can always depend on and that I have to be tough to live here.

It is pretty common. Many new immigrants have gone through the same thing.

Recession, unemployment, hardship, depression, isolation, cold. The longer I live here, the more I realize that Canada is no paradise.

This is a land where you have to struggle hard. You have to pay the price to live here. The weak fall and the strong will remain.

"Don't ask me where I come from. My hometown is far, far away . . ."

I loved this song and I still love it. Whenever I sing it or listen to it, the tears fill my eyes just as before.

But now, the tears are not the same.

Gu Zhenzhen was born and raised in Beijing in the People's Republic of China. She came to Canada in 1990 to study journalism and English literature.

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