Menstruation as taboo in the workplace:

Cis-men's perceptions of menstruation and menstrual stigma through the lenses of femmephobia and dirty femininity

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Abstract

Despite being very common, menstruation at work has, to date, received little attention. Guided by theories of femmephobia and dirty femininity, we explored cis-men's perceptions of menstruation in the workplace in three European countries: Croatia, Germany, and Italy. Semi-structured interviews with 21 cis-men office workers were thematically analysed, uncovering pervasive beliefs and attitudes that sustain and reproduce menstrual stigma. Participants characterised menstruation as irrelevant to the workplace – and even taboo. They felt uncomfortable with the subject matter and believed that it should remain hidden, especially at work. They regularly represented their menstruating colleagues as emotionally unstable, weak, and less competent, reinforcing femmephobic stereotypes. Our findings extend applications of femmephobia to the devaluation and regulation of menstruating bodies in the workplace, and broaden the concept of dirty femininity to include menstruation. To promote inclusive workspaces, interventions should foster dialogue and build empathy between menstruators and non-menstruators, alongside educational initiatives that dismantle patriarchal systems, refute menstruation as taboo, and reduce menstrual stigma at work.

Keywords: menstruation; femmephobia; dirty femininity; stigma; taboo; concealment; ideal worker.

Menstruation as taboo in the workplace: Cis-men's perceptions of menstruation and menstrual stigma through the lenses of femmephobia and dirty femininity

The ways in which societies talk about and regulate menstruation shape how it is experienced, often transforming menstruation from a natural process to one marked by shame and secrecy (Laws, 1990). Around the world, menstruating individuals are expected to manage menstruation discreetly to keep it invisible in public life, and any breach of this norm or "etiquette" (Laws, 1990) can result in embarrassment or stigma. Menstruation should thus be concealed. Already in 1987, anthropologist Emily Martin argued that menstruators were stigmatised in the workplace partly due to masculine organisational biases regarding their menstrual cycles and resulting 'emotional' states (Martin, 1987). More recently, Ussher and Perz (2020) referred to the 'monstrous feminine' menstruator who 'makes trouble' at work by taking too much sick leave (Sayers & Jones, 2014), or worse, bringing their dirty and leaky body into the workplace (Chrisler, 2011; Sang et al., 2021; Stern and Strand, 2022). Therefore, bodies that menstruate breach hegemonic masculinity standards (Collinson & Hearn, 1994) and ideal worker norms (Williams, 2000), and can thus be subjected to femmephobia (Hoskin, 2017; Hoskin, 2019).

Although almost half of all workers menstruate (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024), menstruation in the workplace has received scant scholarly attention. The marginalisation of menstruation research sits within the broader stigmatisation of sexual and reproductive health in the workplace literature. Recently, scholars have begun to disrupt the silencing of feminine bodily experiences by exploring breastfeeding and pumping at work (Bresnahan et al., 2018; Whiley et al., 2022; Burns et al., 2022), menopause (e.g., Atkinson, Carmichael & Duberly, 2020; Atkinson et al., 2020; Butler, 2019; Steffan, 2020; Steffan & Potočnik, 2022; Whiley et al., 2022), and miscarriage (Porschitz & Siler, 2017; Schnitzler, 2024). Menstruation also warrants further attention in research because it is a socially regulated, recurring bodily process that is persistently tied to moral, emotional, and gendered

judgments that present the feminine as dirty (Hoskin, 2017; Hoskin, 2019; Whiley et al., 2022, 2023).

Literature on (cis-)*men's* understanding of sexual and reproductive health at work, particularly menstruation, is almost entirely absent. One exception is Marathe and Raj's (2020) study on Indian students' perceptions of menstrual leave, which found gender differences in attitudes toward menstrual pain's impact on work but similar views on leave policy fairness, pain experience, and overall support, with both genders generally anticipating positive outcomes from menstrual leave (though women expressed more hesitation in using it). Beyond Marathe and Raj's study, there is very little scholarship presented cis-men's perceptions of menstruation in the workplace. This paucity of research is astonishing given that 60 percent of managerial positions are held by men (Field et al., 2023) and men are substantially overrepresented in leadership roles (Begeny et al., 2021). Understanding cis-men's perceptions of menstruation in the workplace is necessary not only because it is understudied but also because such research has the potential to address inequities and acknowledge the practical and psychological impact of menstrual stigma at work. As key decision-makers in organisations, men's beliefs and perceptions about menstruation have a profound impact on how menstrual stigma is reproduced (or challenged) within the workplace. To this end, we ask

1) How do cis-men perceive menstruation in the workplace?

2) How do cis-men's attitudes reinforce or refute broader structures of femmephobia and menstrual stigma at work?

This study leverages femmephobia (Hoskin, 2017; 2019; 2020; Hoskin & Taylor, 2019; Hoskin et al., 2023) and dirty femininity (Whiley et al., 2022; 2023) as two theoretical concepts that are especially salient to menstruation.

Femmephobia and menstruation

Stemming from femme theory (Hoskin, 2017; Hoskin, 2019), femmephobia is the devaluation and regulation of femininity (Hoskin, 2020). Femme theory enables the exploration of gender expression (femininity and masculinity) in addition to, but distinct from, gender; it positions the feminine as an intersectional axis. We appreciate that not all people who menstruate are cis-women. Accordingly, we propose that menstruation is feminine rather than 'of woman'. In line with femme theorists, we consider gender and gender expression as separate (e.g., Gunn & Courtice, 2024; Hoskin, 2021; Messerschmidt, 2024; Whiley et al., 2023). Femme theory derives its roots from lesbian communities in the 1940s (Hoskin, 2017) but has expanded to become an epistemology and a framework of analysis (Hoskin, 2021; Hoskin and Blair, 2024). Femme theory is an especially salient lens with which to unpick cis-men's perceptions and understandings of menstruation, which, in cisheteronormative patriarchal societies, is both connected to women's bodies and the expression of the feminine. Yet many authors insist that menstruation is not "feminine" at all as it is frequently described as smelly and/or disgusting (see, for example, Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2020), attributes that certainly do not align with the idealised notions of the feminine. Femme theory exposes how feminised behaviours and expressions, including menstruation, are systematically devalued, marginalized, and subjugated under patriarchal norms (Hoskin & Serafini, 2023; Hoskin, 2024).

Femmephobia is the fear of the feminine and all that it entails (Hoskin, 2019; Hoskin, 2020), and can include outright hostility towards feminine people and femininity. It thus functions as a regulatory power (Hoskin et al., 2024). Femmephobia reveals how knowledge production and expertise have been co-opted as masculine (Hoskin & Blair, 2024) despite calls for more feminised ways of knowing and being in organisations (Hoskin & Whiley, 2023a; Hoskin and Whiley, 2023b). This is especially pertinent for our study because it is set in organisations, traditionally a masculine space with 'ideal' workers who epitomise masculine ways of being (Acker, 1990). The feminine, including feminine bodies, are abject and out of place in such masculine contexts, especially when they express their 'dirty'

femininity by, for example, breastfeeding (Whiley et al., 2022) and via menopause (Whiley et al., 2023), and, we contend, also by menstruating at work. Femmephobia frames feminine experiences as undesirable, reinforcing femininity as subordinate – it is the 'dirtification' of the feminine. Femmephobia also polices and regulates femininity to conform with patriarchal hegemonic standards (Hoskin & Blair, 2022). Either you sacrifice femininity or you are out (Bonnes, 2025; Hoskin, 2019). In this way, femininity that is performed in-and-for itself, without due regard for patriarchy or hegemony, is deemed to be dirty femininity (Whiley et al., 2022; 2023).

Dirty femininity and menstruation

Dirty femininity emerges from Douglas' (1966) early work on 'dirt' that conceptualises dirt as something out of order, as 'matter out of place' – such as feminine bodies in masculine spaces (Hoskin & Whiley, 2023b). Dirty femininity (Whiley et al., 2022) conceptualises women's bodies, in and outside of work, as being charged with the threat of material and symbolic "dirt", thereby rendering them physically, emotionally, morally, and socially tainted, especially when they engage in behaviours that disrupt or subvert normative gender expectations, a process Butler (2002) describes as "performing gender trouble". Physical 'dirt' is often linked to anything that is considered 'disgusting' or 'gross' and refers to the visibility of 'leaky; bodies, particularly within professional settings, which ultimately disrupt the expectation of feminine bodies being controlled and contained. This form of stigmatising taint is especially pertinent to menstruation due to menstrual blood being positioned as materially dirty (Sang et al., 2021; Quint, 2019). Emotional "dirt" refers to the inability to control one's emotional reactions, which leads to female emotionality often being written off as irrational, which, in turn, exposes its subjects to feelings of vulnerability and the risk of being stigmatised – especially during the premenstrual period where women are portrayed as irrational (King, 2020). Moral "dirt" encompasses the transgression of age and gender intersecting, making her "less of a woman, less feminine" (Whiley et al., 2022, p.

905). Lastly, social "dirt" is tied to the framing of this material and symbolic "dirt" as something to be concealed and to distance oneself from, a social taboo. Within this theoretical framework, the "dirt" that stains women's bodies is to be understood as a social construction that labels its subjects as "abject and out of place", especially in the workplace (Mavin & Grandy, 2016a, p. 1100).

Methods

This exploratory qualitative study was part of a larger European project in Germany, Italy, and Croatia, exploring menstruation at work (Wasner et al., submitted; Braun et al., submitted). This study was approved by Ethics Review Committees at [anonymous] University. Methodology and reporting followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ; Tong et al., 2007).

Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were recruited in three European countries: Croatia, Germany, and Italy to provide a broad sample reflecting cis-men's perspectives on menstruation in a European context. These three particular countries were selected as three of the authors originate from these countries and had a cultural understanding of these contexts, and the capacity to assemble a convenience sample (Winton & Sabol, 2021). Additional participants were reached through snowball sampling (i.e., referrals; Hinton & Ryan, 2020), and no relationship was established with the participants prior to study commencement. Recruitment efforts involved social media posts on LinkedIn and Instagram, and directly reaching out via authors' own networks. Inclusion criteria required (1) individuals to be adult (>18 years) cisgender males, (2) to be office workers, (3) to work in Croatia, Germany, or Italy, and (4) to consent to an audio recording during the interview. Participants received no compensation for participation.

Data Collection

Twenty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted in Croatian, German, and Italian, either in person (at participants' workplace, home or a quiet café) or online (via Google Meet, Zoom, or phone), in a confidential setting and in accordance with participants' preferences in April and May of 2024. We followed best practices for qualitative interviewing (Wutich, Beresford, & Bernard, 2024) within the available time frame and observed clear repetition of themes, indicating that data saturation had likely been achieved. Interviews, lasting between 22 and 72 minutes, were conducted by [blinded for review], all of whom were Master's students under the supervision of [blinded for review], both of whom have extensive experience in conducting qualitative research on, among other things, the intersections of gender and health, and stigma. All interviewers were trained in qualitative interviewing skills in the context of their Master's program. Field notes were made both during and after the interviews. All interviews were conducted one-on-one and no co-workers were present during the interview to reduce the risk of social desirability and minimise any potential influence from co-workers. Prior to data collection, all potential participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedure, confidentiality, and withdrawal options via email or messenger. They subsequently signed an informed consent. No participants refused to participate or dropped out of the study and no repeat interviews were carried out. The study design did not include member checking: transcripts were not shared with participants for review, and they were not invited to comment on the results. Participants' ages ranged from 26 to 64 years, with a mean age of 42.48 (SD = 13.42). Sixteen of the twenty-one participants were in committed relationships or married, with only one identifying as being in a same-sex relationship. Nine participants had children, and of these nine, all but one had at least one daughter. More comprehensive sociodemographic data is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' characteristics

Alias	Country	Age	Relationship status	Children	Occupation	Years at current employer	Duration of recording
Luka	Croatia	52	Married (hetero)	2 (daughter)	Pension insurance	7	00:29:59
Marko	Croatia	44	Single	0	Pension insurance	6	00:33:23
Josip	Croatia	64	Married (hetero)	2 (daughter and son)	Pension insurance	31	00:26:35
Ante	Croatia	50	Married (hetero)	2 (daughter and son)	Architectural design		00:24:13
Nikola	Croatia	36	Married (hetero)	0	Architectural design	8	00:22:36
Bogdan	Croatia	49	Married (hetero)	1 (daughter)	Architectural design	20	00:23:15
Mihovil	Croatia	31	Single	0	Engineering	2	00:22:56
Felix	Germany	27	Single	0	Quality and process management in finance	1	00:23:18
Max	Germany	26	Relationship (hetero)	0	Social media marketing	1.5	00:21:53
Leon	Germany	30	Single	0	Human resource management	1.5	00:28:12
Noah	Germany	56	Married (hetero)	1 (son)	Director technical product management (clothing industry)	11	00:27:57
Tim	Germany	60	Single	6 (3 daughters + 3 sons)	Architectural design	3.5	00:42:59
Jan	Germany	27	Relationship (hetero)	0	Geomatics	3.5	00:33:23
Elias	Germany	36	Relationship (hetero)	0	Product management in software development	0.5	00:53:48
Matteo	Italy	61	Married (hetero)	3 (2 daughters + 1 son)	Management in research and development	5	00:35:57
Lorenzo	Italy	29	Relationship (hetero)	0	Financial advising in engineering	0.5	01:11:36
Michele	Italy	58	Married (hetero)	3 (3 daughters)	Management in metal industry	23	00:54:26
Francesco	Italy	28	Relationship (hetero)	0	Art director in advertising agency	4	00:29:41
Giovanni	Italy	58	Married (hetero)	3 (1 daughter + 2 sons)	Banking operations	5	00:27:12
Gabriele	Italy	33	Relationship (hetero)	0	Freelance	1.5	00:37:06
Federico	Italy	37	Relationship (homosexual relationship)	0	Social work	3	00:41:37

The interview guide (https://osf.io/8zrwe) was collaboratively developed and pretested by the <anonymous> Lab, and included reminders of confidentiality and participants' right to withdraw, as well as structured questions with optional prompts to ensure consistency while allowing space for elaboration. Questions explored participants' understanding, perceptions, and beliefs surrounding menstruation at work. The interviews were audio-recorded on interviewers' smartphones and lasted between 22 and 72 minutes.

Although interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language and researchers shared nationality, likely facilitating rapport and an understanding of cultural social norms, we acknowledge that cis-men participants being interviewed by cisgender women about menstruation might also introduce socially desirable responses. In our participants' accounts, we did not see evidence of this; on the contrary, some responses were quite candidly femmephobic.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were translated into English using DeepL and Lingvanex Translator, with a subsequent manual review. Data were processed with ATLAS.ti (version 24.1.1) by one of the researchers. The researcher applied reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021). As such, she started by familiarising herself with the data through repeated readings. Then, a deductively created codebook based on Hoskin's (2017, 2019) conceptualisation of femmephobia and Whiley et al.'s (2022, 2023) conceptualisation of dirty femininity was applied. Simultaneously, new inductive codes were generated from the transcripts to allow for unanticipated insights to emerge. Segments of texts were highlighted, then revisited, collapsed, or expanded through repeated cycles of analysis, until the final thematic map to address our research questions was reached. Regular meetings, critical discussions, and debriefing facilitated this process. A list of all codes, their definitions, and their links to themes can be found in Table 2.

Reflexivity

All authors are white, cisgender women who menstruate who self-identify as intersectional feminists. Three were Master's students at the time, under the supervision of the other two authors, who hold tenured academic positions. None are cis-men, and thus their positionality as cis-women may have impacted both data collection and analyses. The three researchers who conducted the interviews and conducted the initial analyses originate from the three investigated countries. As such, they were familiar with the contexts in which the interviews took place. Throughout data collection and analyses, all authors engaged in reflexive practices, regularly pausing to reflect on how their interpretations could be influenced by their own assumptions (e.g., about cis-men and about their own culture), cultural backgrounds (e.g., about what it is like to menstruate in Croatia, Germany, and Italy), and prior knowledge (e.g., about menstrual cycles, the patriarchy, and menstruators' position in the workplace). All researchers took part in regular meetings with colleagues and supervisors to critically examine their perspectives, employing several strategies, such as triangulation and peer debriefing, to enhance reflexive practice as they navigated study design, data collection, data analyses, and reporting.

Table 2
Theories, Themes, Codes & Definitions

Theoretical concept	Themes	Code	Definition
Dirty Femininity	Taboo and Concealment (social dirt)	Taboo	The experience of menstruation is often treated as a social taboo, something to be hidden or not discussed openly, especially in workplaces.
		Concealment	The secrecy and the effort to distance oneself from the symptoms of menstruation highlight the social aspect of "dirtiness." In order to avoid social contagion, there is an expectation that menstruation be hidden, especially from men.
	Discomfort and Disgust (physical + social dirt)	Discomfort	Feelings of discomfort when approaching the topic of menstruation highlight the social stigma surrounding it.
		Referring to menstruation as dirty/disgusting	The use of such terms exemplifies the conception of menstruation as physically "dirty".
	Emotional Instability and Gendered humour (emotional + social dirt)	Anticipating emotional reactions from menstruating individuals in the workplace	The display of intense emotions deviate from the expected calm and controlled demeanour which is considered professional and acceptable.
		Gendered humour in workplaces	Jokes at the expense of menstruating individuals' menstruating status.
Femmephobia	Beliefs about menstruation	Traditional beliefs	References to conservative or traditional views and opinions on menstruation.
		Progressive beliefs	References to progressive or liberal views and opinions on menstruation.
	Attitudes towards having conversations about menstruation in the workplace	Positive attitudes	Expressions of support or approval towards having conversations about menstruation in the workplace.
		Negative attitudes	Expressions of disapproval or opposition towards having conversations about menstruation in the workplace.
		Neutral attitudes	Expressions of neither support, nor opposition towards having conversations about menstruation in the workplace
	Generational distinction		References to generational differences in attitudes and beliefs.

	Reflections on gender distribution in the workplace		Acknowledgement of (potential) impact of gender distribution within the workplace on work culture.
Ideal Worker	Availability	Long working hours	Ideal workers are expected to be constantly available and willing to work overtime.
		Prioritisation of work	Ideal workers are assumed to have no significant responsibilities outside of work, such as caregiving.
	Merit-Based Upward Mobility	Taking on additional work	The path to career advancement favours those who can take on many work-related tasks and responsibilities.
	Masculine Traits	Embodiment of favourable "masculine" traits	Descriptions of workplaces that embody masculine traits and behaviours, which include competitiveness, assertiveness, and an emphasis on face time rather than flexibility.
Demographics	Demographics	Age	The age of the participants.
		Relationship status	Whether the participants are single, in a relationship, married, divorced, or in another form of relationship arrangement.
		Children	Whether the participants have children or not. If yes, which age and gender the child/children has/have.
	Gender	Menstruating individual	The participant is a menstruating or former menstruating individual.
		Men	The participant is a cis-men.
	Country	Croatia	The participant is working in an office in Croatia.
		Germany	The participant is working in an office in Germany.
		Italy	The participant is working in an office in Italy.
	Job	Job position	Explanation and description of the current (and if relevant former) job position(s).
		Duration	Time the participant is working in this specific position.
		Office climate	Description of workplace relationships and overall climate.
		Gender division	Description of what the gender division looks like in the participants' place of work.

Note: During the thematic analysis, each code was applied to the corresponding data extracts. Utilizing this coding tree enabled the identification of patterns and themes across the data set, providing insights into participants' experiences and perceptions of the research topic.

Results

We identified four themes: (1) menstruation as a taboo to be concealed in the workplace, (2) discomfort and disinterest, (3) emotional instability and gendered 'humour', and (4) masculine ascendency.

"Nothing to do with work": A taboo to be concealed in the workplace

Menstruation was perceived as taboo. When Mihovil[1] (31, Croatia) was asked whether he had ever found himself in situations where menstruation was discussed exclusively among cis-men, he replied "No, no… [Laugh]… I don't think I have ever, that, we don't touch upon those topics". When conversations about menstruation come up at work, participants reported that the social custom frames the topic as taboo:

> It still tended to be a taboo subject, not in the sense that we can't talk about it in the team, but in terms of the organisation as a whole, it still tended to be a taboo subject, but one that had to be addressed. (Leon, 30, Germany)

This highlights the tension between private openness and public silence: while colleagues may occasionally discuss menstruation informally, participants reflected that organizational norms continue to frame it as taboo, showing how structural culture lags behind interpersonal practice. The persistent framing of menstruation as "taboo" leads to silence and non-menstruating individuals to distance themselves from menstruation as a legitimate concern in workplaces. In fact, when asked how menstruation was viewed within their workplaces, participants plainly stated that, from their (cis-male) perspective, it was not *seen* at all. Some participants said that it is simply not a "big issue" (Jan), mainly because they were not personally affected by it or particularly interested (Bogdan), while one participant traced its lack of importance in professional settings to the fact that menstruating

[1] Pseudonyms have been used to protect participants' identities.

individuals themselves did not report it as important either, otherwise they would "let it shine through" (Giovanni, 58, Italy).

Varying accounts from other participants suggest similar experiences of silence or avoidance. Elias (36, Germany), for instance, argued that "(…) if (menstruation) doesn't have any effect on the woman's performance or well-being, then I think it's simply not information that is necessary to communicate in everyday working life (…)". This sentiment was amplified by Max and Nikola who claimed that menstruation "has nothing to do with work" (Nikola, 36, Croatia) and that "(…) you should be considered an employee regardless of your menstruation" (Max, 26, Germany), suggesting that the matter is not only overlooked in professional settings, but is regarded as something that *should be* kept separate from them. The reason provided for this is that menstruation is widely regarded as a private or "intimate" subject, something that should be concealed to somehow protect menstruating individuals' privacy, as articulated by Noah and echoed by the majority of participants:

> If an employee comes to me and says 'I'm on my period, I'm not feeling well' (…) that's not a topic I discuss with other employees afterwards because that's the discretion I'm talking about. It's nobody else's business because I do make a distinction between menstrual problems and a cold, yes. Because I think that's just more intimate and that's why I wouldn't talk about it with others. (Noah, 56, Germany)

The imperative to conceal menstruation in workplaces, however, is often upheld and perpetuated by social norms much more rooted in shame than safeguarding, as demonstrated by Jan (27, Germany) who would not talk about it with colleagues if he were "affected by it [if he were a menstruating individual]" and considers it "offensive" to bring up the subject on his own initiative. Moreover, when asked whether they had ever seen colleagues "visibly menstruating", all participants but one (Federico, 37, Italy) claimed not to have. Subsequent probing, however, led participants to reflect on the meaning of "visible menstruation", with some tracing it back to observable states of pain (Francesco, 28, Italy),

and others deducing a colleague's menstruating status from their choice in clothing, denoting an attempt to conceal:

> Then, if you want a deduction on my end, someone who always comes in wearing pants, wearing leggings, if for four days she comes in with a skirt, my guess is because she doesn't want to show the bulge [referring to the 'bulkiness' of menstrual pads] *(laughing).* (Giovanni, 58, Italy)

Along these lines, many participants confirmed that, most likely, menstruation is made unobservable by the efforts of menstruating individuals to conceal it, as underscored by Michele (58, Italy): "It falls under this secrecy thing, so one wraps (menstrual products) in a kind of particular way, puts away, you know, and so you don't notice, right?"

Lastly, most participants suggested that menstruating individuals' efforts to conceal were especially targeted towards cis-male co-workers, often assuming they would be more comfortable speaking about menstruation in the company of other menstruating co-workers (Gabriele, 33, Italy; Josip, 64, Croatia; Mihovil, 31, Croatia). This assumption is supported by the surprised reactions many interviewees expected to have if a menstruating co-worker were to initiate a conversation on the topic with them:

> First of all, I would be surprised because it would be the first one, so, if it's the first time, you have to understand what is she telling me, why is she telling me this? I don't know, I mean I would be surprised. (Matteo, 61, Italy)

"I don't find anything interesting or fascinating or useful in talking about menstruation": Discomfort and disinterest

Menstruation was often experienced as an uncomfortable topic of conversation. Some participants reported feeling discomfort when approaching the subject because of its "intimate" nature (Ante, 50, Croatia), while others struggled to pinpoint root cause of this discomfort, as illustrated by Nikola (36, Croatia) when asked how he would feel if he had to alert a co-worker about a visible period stain: "Well maybe I would… I have no idea. Maybe I

would feel a little uncomfortable." Interviewer: "Mhm, why do you think that?" Nikola: "Well… I have no idea…".

A handful of participants claimed they would experience no first-hand embarrassment or discomfort (Francesco, 28, Italy; Gabriele, 28, Italy), but would be weary of discussing menstruation at work out of fear of making other co-workers uncomfortable (Felix, 26, Germany). Josip (64, Croatia) and Leon (30, Germany) explained that they would avoid bringing up the topic with a menstruating co-worker so as not to overstep any personal boundaries they may have, while Tim (60, Germany) acknowledged how cultural differences in sensitivities play a role in the way he goes about addressing menstruation. Nikola (36, Croatia), instead, when asked how he would act in a hypothetical situation in which a colleague was showing visible signs of menstruation, admitted that he would feel "a little uncomfortable", but that he would assume another menstruating individual would alert them to the situation, suggesting that this maleness separated him from this distinctly feminine phenomenon.

Indeed, the belief that menstruation is and should be discussed only among other menstruating individuals was widespread, with many participants claiming they had little to say, did not want to risk violating boundaries, or simply found the topic uninteresting. Furthermore, even participants who *had* engaged in workplace conversations on the topic struggled to see their value beyond the "functional" (Matteo, 61, Italy) aspect of asking for or providing assistance:

> (…) I honestly don't find anything interesting or fascinating or useful in talking about menstruation so I don't really understand in what terms it could be talked about ... if not again in an area though that falls into its more personal implications. (Lorenzo, 29, Italy)

Similarly, Michele believed that speaking about it could be permissible, if it led to specific support needs:

> Theoretically, I don't have a bias to talk about the topic personally... it depends precisely on the context and the reason for talking about it, (…) if the explanation is given, because there is a request for help in some way, one is trying to help the person, so there is no discussion. (Michele, 58, Italy)

The belief that menstruation has nothing to do with them underscores a sense of detachment and disconnect from the topic of menstruation for cis-men. This corroborates the stereotype that menstruation is not a domain for men. Despite this, a minority of participants did advocate for having honest conversations about menstruation with menstruating co-workers because "(…) the whole thing is not given the priority it perhaps should be (…)" (Max, 26, Croatia). These interviewees believed that more open dialogue on the topic of menstruation would raise much-needed awareness about various overlooked women's issues, such as the division of domestic responsibilities (Luka, 52, Croatia).

Some participants also noted that the discomfort people feel when approaching the topic of menstruation may stem from its common portrayal as physically "dirty" (Federico, 37, Italy). To this effect, unprompted mentions of *not* experiencing "disgust" (Gabriele, 33, Italy) or "repulsion" (Nikola, 36, Croatia) in both hypothetical and real-life scenarios, while optimistic in theory, highlight underlying societal beliefs that menstruation is somehow physically "dirty". One participant, while advocating for open conversations about menstruation in the workplace, emphasized how menstrual stigma, which portrays those who menstruate as physically "dirty", negatively impacts workplace dynamics:

> I've heard people even… people talking about menstruation as "dirty" and things like that. And this view could have repercussions on the work career as well, if not directly even on the, almost closer, on the climate that is created in the work environment (Federico, 37, Italy).

Ultimately, these diverse accounts paint a picture of the varying degrees to which people feel uncomfortable about discussing or acknowledging menstruation. Moreover, the use of terms "disgust" and "repulsion" by participants reinforces a perspective that

menstruation is seen as *physically* dirty, either by participants themselves or in their descriptions of how they think others view menstruation.

"Some sort of joke": Emotional Instability and Gendered 'Humour'

Participants perceived menstruators to be highly emotional and displays of intense emotions on the part of menstruating colleagues were thought to deviate from the expected calm and controlled demeanour that is considered professional and acceptable in the workplace. Participants used terms such as 'intimidating' (Lorenzo, 29), 'difficult' (Giovanni, 58), 'unapproachable' (Giovanni, 58), 'nervous' (Matteo, 61; Marko, 44; Josip,64), and 'crazy' (Jan, 27) when describing menstruating individuals at work. This reflects the ongoing perpetuation of the stereotype that most (if not all) menstruating individuals experience some form of premenstrual disorder such as premenstrual syndrome (PMS). Josip's described talking about menstruation with male colleagues as follows:

> Sometimes - only if we - like more through some sort of joke if someone, I don't know… was in a bad mood or I don't know, sarcastic or that, and then it's like 'Ah, that PMS' or something, because it's known that women are usually, in that period when like, before the menstruation, they can be a little nervous and all that, but nothing [it's not intended to be] mean. (Josip, 64, Croatia)

Michele (58, Italy) also detailed anticipating emotional reactions from menstruating co-workers "on the wrong day" and cautiously leaving them alone when he recognised "these symptoms". Similarly, Elias (36, Germany) suggested steadfastness as an attribute of an ideal worker, but questioned whether menstruation might affect menstruating individuals' ability to demonstrate this trait, given its demands for "calm, (…) and composure". Simply put, what emerged from the data was a portrayal of menstruating individuals as emotionally unstable during or before their periods. Interestingly, participants were cognisant that emotional instability is a stereotype. For example, Jan claimed that it was "offensive" yet in doing so, reaffirmed the need for secrecy by suggesting that it was "nobody's business".

Another recurrent theme (hinted at in Josip's remarks) is "gendered humour" about menstruating individuals' emotionality. One participant attempted to explain the origin of this type of humour within cis-male groups, asserting that it stems not from mockery, but from ignorance, embarrassment, and a desire for comradery:

> There's a -- when you get together among men (…) you try to create a kind of empathy by going to confront issues that, from a man's point of view, are, let's say, mysterious - that of a woman's menstruation, of which you don't appreciate, at that time, nature's incredible ability to create life, okay? But it lapses often into jokes. So, indeed, within the male component, these are not topics that are dealt with because I think they embarrass, and the way to get rid of that embarrassment, and, therefore, not to deal with the issue from a serious point of view, (…) is to send it on the joke, on the salacious joke, which is read as, of course, a, let's say, an offensive attitude – anyway - not respectful, but which actually stems from a personal embarrassment because one does not have the ability to deal with the topic in a little bit more thoughtful of a way, probably because one has never thought about it (Michele, 58, Italy).

Michele's reference to "personal embarrassment" reveals indeed that cis-male discomfort with menstruation can translate into humour as a coping mechanism, allowing cis-men to deflect a topic they feel unequipped to discuss seriously. This dynamic illustrates how ignorance and insecurity can be masked by jokes, which may foster comradery among men but simultaneously perpetuate disrespect toward menstruating colleagues. Indeed, mentions of gendered humour appeared across the dataset: some participants claimed the intent of these jokes was never malicious (Josip, 64, Croatia; Marko, 44, Croatia), while others acknowledged the potential harm they could inflict on menstruating co-workers (Elias, 36, Germany; Lorenzo, 29, Italy; Tim, 60, Germany), or pointed out that "(…) age is a factor here" (Francesco, 28, Italy), suggesting that such jokes are more common among older cis-men. This may reflect generational differences in socialisation, with older men more

accustomed to norms in which menstruation is considered taboo or a source of humour. To this point, Jan remarked "Well, we have a few colleagues who are like that, a few older colleagues, they always make old man jokes. [Laugh]. And then I think to myself, 'If I were a woman now, I wouldn't want to talk to them about it either'" (Jan, 27, Germany).

"Menstruation is a weakness": Masculine ascendency

Participants discussed also how menstruation does not always fit with what it is to be a good employee. Many made reference to the dominance of masculine characteristics that reflect notions of the ideal worker. For example, Lorenzo (29, Italy) noted the intense competitiveness in his previously male-dominated office, stating, "I started working in a very competitive place... I'm not suggesting any link or correlation, but it was also a much more male-dominated one". While Lorenzo did not draw explicit conclusions, he acknowledged the heightened competitive nature of that environment and went on to describe the expectations set upon employees to conceal any sign of vulnerability of weakness, such as menstruation:

> Don't show uncertainty, don't show weakness - that also goes more with those characteristics there, right? That is, of the competitive element (…) I would extend it though, I mean, the correlation of "not showing weaknesses" ... it's improper to say that menstruation is a weakness, however, to some extent it was. It's an element of humanity that creates uncertainty. (Lorenzo, 29, Italy)

Lorenzo's statement makes salient how menstruating individuals do not match with this highly gendered "ideal worker" norm. His description of menstruation as "an element of humanity that creates uncertainty" is particularly revealing, suggesting not only that menstruation itself is viewed as destabilising within a hyper-competitive, masculine-coded workplace, but also that the *possibility* of menstruation - whether people are menstruating or simply assumed to be - introduces uncertainty. In this sense, the stigma does not rest solely on menstruation as a physical process, but on the broader cultural construction of it as

unpredictable, disruptive, and incompatible with the figure of the reliable, unemotional worker.

Some participants revealed that this is not only something that is perpetuated by cis-men but also internalized and expressed by cis-women. Tim (60, Germany) shared experiences with cis-women being "(…) almost stricter bosses than men", who encourage young menstruating employees to "grit (their) teeth and do it" in the face of menstrual pains. This solidifies how integral certain masculine ideals, such as emotional suppression, truly are to the construction of successful professional identities. This finding also underscores the effort menstruating individuals must exert to overcome deeply ingrained cultural attitudes about gender roles that shape their socially defined functions and characteristics at work.

Discussion

This study set out to explore cis-men's perceptions of menstruation in the workplace, and how cis-men's attitudes reinforce or refute broader structures of femmephobia and menstrual stigma at work. We found evidence that menstruation is widely constructed as taboo, especially at work. Participants tended to regard the topic of menstruation as uncomfortable and something to be concealed – or at best, only discussed amongst menstruating individuals. Most also believed that menstruating individuals were more likely to be unpredictable, emotional, and irrational, despite recognising that this was a stereotype. Overall, gendered humour targeted menstruating status and masculine ascendency framed menstruation as inferior, particularly in the context of workplaces.

Our findings evidence several examples of femmephobia (Hoskin, 2017; 2019; Hoskin & Taylor, 2019; Hoskin et al., 2023) in relation to menstruation. First, there is the belief that menstruation is taboo and the expectation that it should be concealed, at least from cis-men at work. While Laws (1990) points to "etiquette" as a useful way to capture rules of discretion around menstruation, our participants overwhelmingly framed it as a "taboo." The term "taboo" accordingly conveys not just concealment but the stronger sense

of stigma and secrecy that shaped their views. Furthermore, consistent with Thornton (2013), we found that participants used euphemisms to refer to menstruation (e.g., wrong days, those days etc.) and openly admitted (to female researchers) that it was irrelevant in the workplace – unless help was needed. This tabooing and marginalisation of menstruation puts menstruating workers in an impossible position: either conform to patriarchal feminine ideals (e.g., modesty, discretion, fresh, clean; Whiley et al., 2023) or perform "female masculinity" (Halberstam, 1998) to meet organisational demands and align with the masculine-coded the ideal worker (e.g., always available, working, and competent; Acker, 1990). This tension resonates with the research on hegemonic masculinity (Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Rosen & Nofziger, 2018) and gender identity construction (Kimmel, 1997), which identifies dominance, competitiveness, aggression, and the suppression of emotions like fear, sadness, and vulnerability, as masculine. In contrast, characteristics such as emotionality, softness, and vulnerability are perceived to be feminine (Hoskin & Whiley, 2023; Schwartz, 2020) and menstruators are expected to suppress their femininity to conform in the workplace (Bonnes, 2025; Rudman& Phelan, 2008). Although we are not presuming that all menstruators want to talk about menstruation at work or indeed disclose their status, the marginalisation of this phenomenon and the expectation that it should be concealed is one way in which patriarchal hegemonies are reproduced by shunning the feminine, subjugating, and silencing it – in other words, femmephobia manifested.

Another example of femmephobia in our data was cis-men's pervasive tendency to label menstruators as hormonal and irrational, representing in the 'irrational female' stereotype (King, 2020). While only around 12% of menstruating individuals experience clinically diagnosable PMS or PMDD (Hofmeister & Bodden, 2016), many more experience some emotional or physical changes prior to menstruation. Recognition of pain, a far more common and disruptive symptom (Choi et al., 2010), was almost completely absent from participants' accounts. While menstruating individuals may experience discomfort or pain, they remain fully capable of working. Therefore, dismissing pain while resorting to gendered

so-called humour and mockery not only obscures these real experiences but also delegitimises them, reinforcing stigma and femmephobia in workplace contexts. According to Link and Phelan (2014), stigma "hidden in processes", although less obvious than more overt measures of subjugation, are just as "potent" (p.7). In this way, targeting menstruators or stereotypes about menstruation (e.g., PMS) communicates that menstruating individuals are not welcome in the workplace and perpetuates menstrual stigma.

In addition to contributions to femmephobia (Hoskin, 2017; 2019; Hoskin & Taylor, 2019; Hoskin et al., 2023), our findings also offer some insights to conceptualisations of dirty femininity (Whiley et al., 2022; 2023). In participants' accounts, we found evidence of the 'dirtification' of femininity via menstruation. First, participants distanced themselves from menstruation, claiming that they had no interest in the topic, that it was a private matter, or that it was repulsive. In any of these instances, their beliefs perpetuate menstrual concealment (Wood, 2020) and position menstruation potentially as socially and physically dirty. In participants' view, menstruation *is*, and *should be*, a private, "intimate" matter. Indeed, research shows that menstruators feel ashamed and embarrassed to publicly disclose their menstrual status (Winkler, 2020), but why should menstruation be private unless it is socially constructed as taboo and dirty (Whiley et al., 2022)? Some participants even claimed that menstruation was "irrelevant" to the workplace, despite having many menstruating colleagues. A minority, however, accepted that some disclosure was permissible if it related to support and accommodations.

Moreover, by alluding to menstruating individuals' emotionality and irrationality (read, emotional dirt; Whiley et al., 2022; 2023), participants' perceptions contributed to and reproduced stereotypes of menstruators who are emotionally volatile and unpredictable.

Implications and Recommendations

Research has shown that encouraging positive discourse on the topic of menstruation while fostering a safe and open work environment is an effective way to

decrease stigma (Van Lonkhuijzen et al., 2022). Along these lines, Maunder and White (2019), and Stutterheim et al. (2023) propose interpersonal contact between individuals with and without the stigmatised identity - in this case, menstruation - to increase mutual understanding. Concretely, this means that empathy-induction interventions involving perspective-taking exercises might help non-menstruating individuals such as cis-men to empathise with their menstruating colleagues and better recognize and acknowledge their needs (Batson et al., 2002; Stutterheim et al., 2025). Education campaigns could also be used to inform non-menstruating employees about how menstrual cycles can impact daily and professional life (Barnack-Tavlaris et al., 2019), while upstream policies or environmental changes (Sang et al., 2021) can both reduce stigma and support menstruators in workplaces, which are often not designed to accommodate periods, perimenopause, or menopause (Karin, 2021). When contemplating various interventions to shift stigmatising workplace beliefs and behaviours, effective design and implementation are of utmost importance. Stutterheim et al. (2023) propose Intervention Mapping as a guide to developing, implementing, and evaluating interventions aimed at stigma reduction. This can, and certainly should, be applied to the context of menstrual stigma in the workplace, and for the purposes of promoting more open and positive attitudes towards menstruation and menstruating individuals.

Strengths and Limitations

This study has strengths and limitations. The qualitative design provided a deep, nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences and complex perspectives of 21 participants, varying in age and country of origin. By conducting our study with cis-male office workers, we were able to access previously unexplored perspectives on menstruation at work. While not experientially impacted by it, cis-men interact with menstruation and contribute significantly to upholding menstrual stigma, particularly in professional environments where they still hold the majority of managerial and leadership positions.

The recruitment methods of convenience and snowball sampling may have introduced selection bias, resulting in the inclusion of participants with similar perspectives and socio-cultural backgrounds. However, we sought to overcome this by recruiting in multiple European counties and across a broad age range. Another limitation of this study is the absence of data regarding participants' co-habitants, which restricts our ability to assess the influence of household dynamics on the participants' perceptions of menstruation. Future research should aim to recruit a more diverse sample and include more nuanced reflections on the impact of intercultural differences, age, as well as gather data on living arrangements (e.g. household size, relationships, and co-habitants' attitudes), to better understand how family, roommates, or partner interactions shape attitudes and beliefs.

Furthermore, the fact that all researchers were cisgender women may have caused participants to feel less comfortable or unable to fully identify with the interviewers, possibly leading interviewees to offer more socially desirable answers rather than fully honest ones. Nonetheless, we observed multiple accounts of stigma and marginalisation, suggesting that our findings may be just the tip of the iceberg.

Conclusion

This study advances our understanding of cis-men's perceptions of menstruation in the workplace and how femmephobic, stigmatising beliefs shape workplace dynamics, rendering menstruation at work as dirty femininity. Key findings highlighted how beliefs about menstruating individuals' emotional instability, when combined with the typically masculine traits associated with the ideal worker norm, contribute to reinforcing the menstrual concealment imperative and perpetuate the notion that menstruation *should be* considered a private matter. While some participants acknowledged the benefits of discussing menstruation in the workplace to reduce stigma, many contended that the subject's intimate nature underscores its irrelevance and inappropriateness in professional settings, proving the need for targeted interventions. Initiatives aimed at promoting interpersonal contact and

increasing empathy have been shown to successfully reduce stigma, and implementing large-scale educational campaigns can significantly enhance non-menstruating individuals' understanding of menstruation. We urge organizations to consider the findings and suggestions of this study and hope to inspire further research on menstruation at work and menstrual stigma, ultimately contributing to the advancement of gender equality in the workplace and, more broadly, in society.

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