

12th Linking
Research, Policy
and Practice
Vol 2. June 2024



FLOWING FREEDOM
*Bodily Autonomy Through
Menstruation and Abortion Access*

Share-Net
Netherlands
The Knowledge Platform on
Sexual and Reproductive Health & Rights



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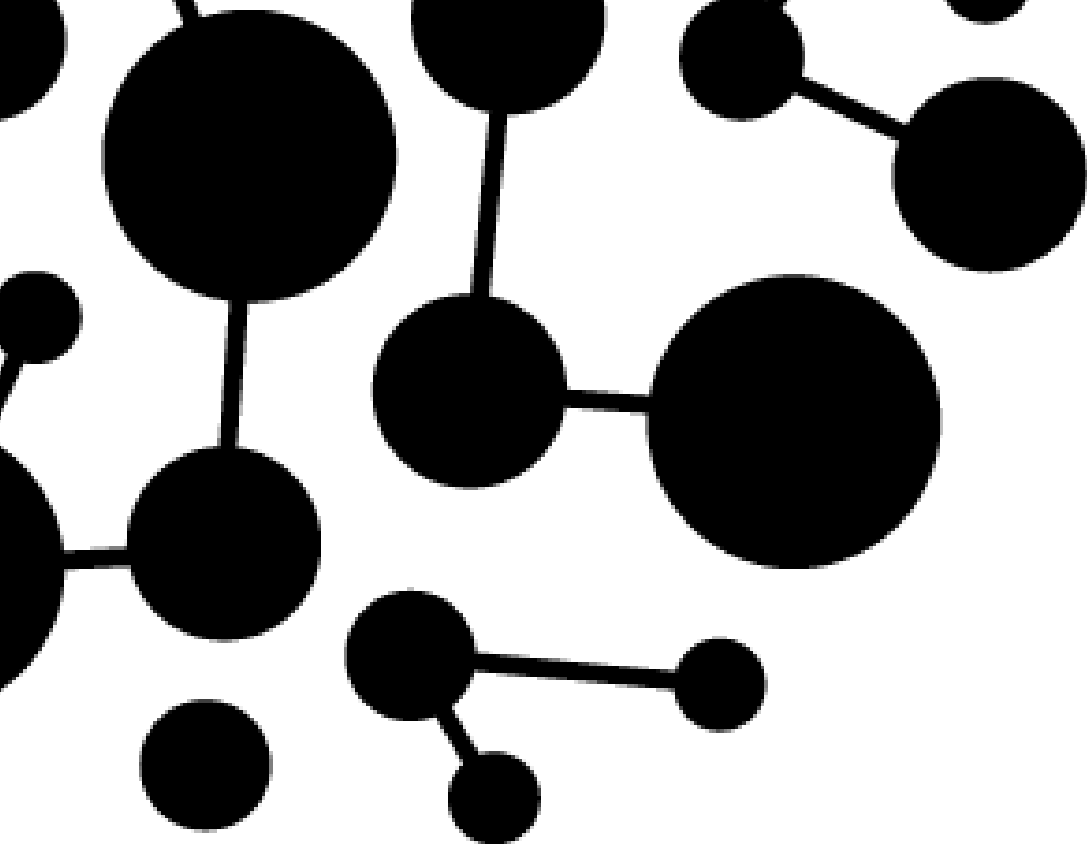
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SHARE-NET NETHERLANDS

Linking Research, Policy and Practice

Share-Net Netherlands is the Dutch knowledge platform on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and one of the seven country hubs of Share-Net International. Guided by the aim to make SRHR knowledge accessible, Share-Net aspires to be a convening place for feminists, activists and anyone who is dedicated to fighting for human rights.

Every year, Share-Net Netherlands convenes the Linking Research, Policy and Practice (LRPP) Conference to bring together young researchers with policymakers, practitioners, and researchers working on SRHR in international development. The LRPP creates a space to disseminate groundbreaking new knowledge, engage in open dialogue, identify further gaps in research, policy, and practice, and harness networking opportunities for meaningful partnerships and collaboration.

On November 2nd 2023, the 12th edition of the LRPP was held at the KIT Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam. Ten budding researchers presented their papers across the issues of legalisation and (de)criminalisation of safe abortion, menstrual health and experiential narratives, maternal health and service provision, gender-based violence, sexual consent, and inclusive and intersectional SRHR.

This issue explores the research presented at the session on Menstrual Health and Safe Abortion.




CONTEXTUALISING *menstrual health and safe abortion*

By Shannon Mathew

ASSERTING CONTROL OVER YOUR BODY AND REPRODUCTIVE CHOICES IS A POWERFUL MANIFESTATION OF AGENCY AND LIBERATION.

To view menstruation and abortion from the lens of bodily autonomy is to stress the importance of reproductive health and justice as an inalienable fundamental right. However, when deeply entrenched inequalities and systemic barriers impede freely exercising these rights, the hitherto simple act of managing your own bodily functions becomes a revolutionary action.

While there exist universal experiences and archetypes, reproductive health decision-making is unsurprisingly embedded in its socio-cultural, political, and legal contexts as much as it is consequence of it. As such, the rigidity or malleability of an individual's immediate and larger environment becomes central in shaping the experience. As the three presenters featured in this issue explored in their research, the ability to navigate and control one's menstruation or abortion represents a last bastion of agency amidst broader limitations on individual autonomy and rights.

A portrait of a young woman with long brown hair tied in a bun, smiling warmly. She is wearing a grey tank top, a necklace with a green stone and a silver pendant, and colorful earrings. The background is a solid light blue color.

**RESILIENCE WITHOUT AGENCY:
HOW WOMEN IN BALI AND EAST
NUSA TENGGARA, INDONESIA
NAVIGATE THEIR MENSTRUATION
WITHIN THEIR EMBEDDED AND
EMBODIED ENVIRONMENT**

Utrecht University

I am Fien de Ridder, a recent Dutch Cultural Anthropology graduate! With a passion for travelling and with a background in Humanities, I am interested in researching people, their culture and environment. My keen focus lies in public health, particularly focusing on women's rights and well-being.

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RESILIENCE WITHOUT AGENCY

How women in Bali and East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia navigate their menstruation within their embedded and embodied environment

By Fien de Ridder
Utrecht University

Exploring how Indonesian women navigate their menstrual health within their embedded and embodied environment, this study explores local contexts that consider an encompassing environment of culture, menstrual products, social networks, water, and other infrastructures. Hereby, an anthropological lens has been employed, considering **menstrual health as holistic concept**. By means of interviews, conversations and observations, women show resilience without agency, due to the limits of their unstable or insecure environment.

Methodology

In Bali, the majority of data collection involved semi-structured interviews in public areas such as cafes or offices, either in small group settings or with a single interviewee. In East Nusa Tenggara, semi-structured interviews were conducted in homes or communal spaces, which also allowed for participant observation and informal conversations as a means of data collection.

Key Findings

Global discourses focus on water and product scarcity, instead of quality. Social networks, such as 'menstrual kinship', sources of information, patriarchy and (infra)structures, such as electricity, waste management, water (pipes) influence menstrual health practices and perceptions in Indonesia. Dialectic relation between women and their environment.....

Implication for policy and practice

Climate change becomes a bodily experience to a different extent for menstruating women. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize that climate change is a gendered issue and to emphasize and include this perspective in climate change policies and research. Additionally, it is crucial to acknowledge menstrual pads as (climate) waste and to apply more pressure on reusable pad production.

Furthermore, there should be an emphasis on national Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) education to address these concerns comprehensively.

Conclusion

There exists a dialectic relation between women and their environment, where resilience, defined as "the action of rebounding or swinging back to a stable status quo of existence," serves to counteract the 'victimizing' narratives often present in women's menstrual health discourses. Agency, referring to the ability to make independent choices and take action within specific social and cultural contexts, plays a crucial role in this dynamic. Moreover, these concepts are embedded and embodied within global discourses, social networks, and infrastructures, influencing women's experiences and interactions with their surroundings.

From the LRPP Session moderator

Exploring menstrual health in the context of women's environment in Indonesia, this study shed light on how they cope with dislocations caused by climate change, even if not explicitly labeled as such. The study revealed that Indonesian women exhibit remarkable resilience but often lack the agency to alter their circumstances.



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YOU HAVE TO SEE MENSTRUAL HEALTH AS A HOLISTIC ISSUE. WE NEED TO BE LOOKING AT THE BIGGER STRUCTURES WHEN DESIGNING MENSTRUAL HEALTH POLICIES AND PROGRAMS TO ENHANCE WOMEN'S WELLBEING.



'IF I CAN'T BLEED THAT IS THE PROBLEM': MENSTRUAL NARRATIVES IN BALI

Universiteit van Amsterdam

I am a medical student halfway through my training. I reside and study in Amsterdam. Last year, my profound interest in the body beyond its individual functioning drew me to the masters Medical Anthropology at the UVA, which I recently completed.

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'IF I CAN'T BLEED THAT IS THE PROBLEM'

Menstrual narratives in Bali

By Liv Wage
University of Amsterdam

This research focused on the lived experiences of menstruation in Bali, Indonesia. Through interviews and participant observation, menstruation is posed as a holistic concept that intersects with themes of womanhood, fertility, and gendered, familial and societal expectations. The personal narratives presented in this work refute common discourses around menstrual health in public health programs, which often take a universal, biomedical stance.

Methodology

This study, based on 8 weeks of fieldwork in Bali, sheds light on how Balinese women themselves experience menstruation. Based on interviews and observations with 19 participants, this thesis focuses on the stories of 5 menstruating women.

Using a phenomenological lens, these lived experiences reveal the complex and multifaceted meanings of menstruation in specific contexts.

Key Findings

A set of responsibilities associated with menstruation emerges from these narratives. They highlight how micro, everyday lived experiences are constructed by social expectations and values as Balinese women navigate both being and having a menstruating body.



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**1.8 BILLION PEOPLE
MENSTRUATE
GLOBALLY, YET
EACH DOES SO
UNIQUELY.**

Rohatgi & Dash, 2023

Implication for policy and practice

Menstrual health encompasses many life domains and is intricately linked to health, gender, and sexuality. Understanding menstrual experiences requires recognizing their contextual nature and incorporating local knowledge systems. Therefore, a holistic approach is necessary for more significant impact, as menstrual health extends beyond just hygiene enquiries.

Conclusion

The phenomenological accounts display the inherent tensions that arise between menstrual experiences and the assumptions and epistemologies that underpin public health programs that seek to improve menstrual health. This work underscores the contingent nature of menstruation and its interconnectedness with notions of womanhood, sexuality, and fertility, highlighting its multifaceted significance that extends far beyond a biological hygiene concern. Overall, this thesis argues for the recognition of menstrual health as both contextual and individual. In turn, public health programs that seek to improve menstrual health should recognize its holistic and broad conceptualization in the lives of individual menstruating women.

From the LRPP Session moderator

Challenging the medical-only perspective, the qualitative data from this study unveiled the intricate connections between menstruation, women's fertility, sexuality, and womanhood, emphasizing that it is far more than a mere biological process.



**“THE ABORTION GAVE ME
MY LIFE BACK”
WOMEN’S LONG-TERM
EXPERIENCES WITH
TELEMEDICAL ABORTION
IN LEGALLY RESTRICTED
COUNTRIES**

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Women on Web, King's College London

I am a driven researcher with a Master's in International Public Health and a nursing background. As a research volunteer at Women on Web, I gather and study global narratives on abortion access and its impact on women's lives.

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“THE ABORTION GAVE ME MY LIFE BACK”

Women’s long-term experiences with telemedical abortion in legally restricted countries

By Romy van den Dungen
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Approximately 700 million women (41%) of reproductive age live in countries with restrictive abortion laws. To overcome these constraints, women are increasingly accessing abortion through telemedicine abortion services. 13 women living in legally restricted countries were interviewed about the influence of access to telemedical abortion on their lives. Our findings highlight the positive influence of access to abortion by having control over their lives and the importance of supportive networks in addressing reproductive health needs.

Methodology

The study involved conducting 13 in-depth and semi-structured interviews with participants aged 24-56 years. These participants had accessed the telemedical abortion service WoW between 2016 and 2018. Participants were from 3 different countries that had restrictive abortion laws at the time of their abortion. The interview transcripts were analysed thematically.

Key Findings

Three key themes were identified: 1) Access to abortion gave the participants control over their life, allowing them to pursue their personal goals (e.g. continue studying); 2) The influence of the legally restricted environment wears off over time and their well-being improved; 3) Participants were creating social supportive network to help others by sharing information or access to abortion, while also seeking to reduce the taboo by discussing abortion with others.



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11% OF WOMEN LIVE IN PLACES WHERE ABORTION IS RESTRICTED. ACCESS TO ABORTION GAVE THEM A SENSE OF CONTROL OF THEIR LIVES, ABORTION OPENED OPPORTUNITIES IN LIFE AND INFLUENCED THEIR EDUCATION AND CAREER, FINANCIAL SITUATION, AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Implication for policy and practice

Menstrual health encompasses many life domains and is intricately linked to health, gender, and sexuality. Understanding menstrual experiences requires recognizing their contextual nature and incorporating local knowledge systems. Therefore, a holistic approach is necessary for more significant impact, as menstrual health extends beyond just hygiene enquiries.

Conclusion

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From the LRPP Session moderator

Delving into the experiences of women who sought abortions in countries with legal restrictions and how it impacted their lives, this study showed how access to telemedical abortions allowed participants to regain control over their lives, and the influence of legal restrictions diminished over time.



THE POLITICAL PLAYGROUND *of (uter)Us*

By Shannon Mathew

**THE FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM
HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN THE
FAVOURED PLAYGROUND OF POLITICS
AND POWER GRABS, BUT HOW ARE
MENSTRUATING AND ABORTION-
SEEKING BODIES CREATING THEIR**

