

## MENSTRUAL CYCLE CONTROL - A CHOICE OR AN ILLUSION OF CHOICE

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### Dear editor,

I have read with great interest the exhaustive review "Menstrual cycle control- a controversial example of human enhancement in relation to women's body and psyche" (Martinelli 2020).

I agree with the Authors' conclusion that "*the advancement of medical science allows the women already today to choose to adopt or not adopt the innovation...*".

However, I believe that two aspects deserve further reflections.

First of all, as Wood underlined in her paper (Wood 2020), "should menstruation be a choice?" or rather choice is an illusion of choice, a rhetorical paradox?

It is well known that feelings about menstruation vary according to the socio-cultural context and that stereotypes are historically transmitted generation after generation. Even today, in Western World, girls internalize the patriarchal assumption, which is transmitted by family, school, and society, that menstruation is uncomfortable, shameful, and dirty.

Advertisements reinforce this feeling, underlying the concept of "hygiene" and "freedom" from the inconvenience of menstruation for which the healthcare system and pharmaceutical companies offer the "choice" to set free.

Medicalization of every moment of post-menarchal age (menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause) remains a way to control and discredit the "flowing" female body, reaffirming the sexist ideology of the male body as "normal" and, as a consequence, that any deviance from this static model represents some form of disease that must be treated.

The blood taboo is still alive and well and so is "the culture of concealment", a term coined by Houppert (Houppert 1999) to explain how women are manipulated to feel ashamed and to maintain secrecy about their menstruation, not only in deeds but even in words, since in most cases menstruation is not referred directly but addressed with euphemisms.

Furthermore, menstruated women are the opposite of sexually attractive ones, and are reported to be weak, frail, emotional, and unreliable at work, so it is not surprising that women actually "choose" not to be that way and consider menstruation as a curse. Claiming to be released from that

misfortune may be a strategy for gaining acceptance in the patriarchal society and to realize both their public and private lives.

In the workplace, women may be victims of a particular gender-based violence exerted by the modern capitalist society, which - in a struggle for profit- may press them to have menstrual cycle control in an attempt to reduce absenteeism and improve performances, actually through their de-feminization.

In addition to discussing the choice of controlling menstrual cycle for non-medical reasons, the second aspect to consider is the chance of having *the right* to be menstruated and to have access to menstrual products.

In many countries, women are still victims of cultural restrictions, seclusion and exclusion from family and society during their periods, which affect their lives, health, and freedom, leaving them exposed to blame and to environmental dangers and violence.

Many poor women cannot afford tampons or pads even in the developed countries. In many countries, menstrual products are taxed as luxury items. The tax rates reflect the male perspective and the gender gap in culture and politics. Although the so-called "tampon tax" is widely criticized, tampons in Italy are still taxed at a rate of 22%, while razor blades are at 4%.

For the above-mentioned reasons, I appreciate the conclusions of the authors that "*it would be suitable the coexistence between women who claimed menstruation as the biological essence and women who claim it as an option*" (Martinelli 2020), but I am also convinced that menstruation is mainly a topic to resume discussion about gender equality and women empowerment.

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