

No. 26

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY SPECIAL SERIES* (1)

February 2021

告别“月经羞耻”，“互助卫生巾”只是一小步 'Mutual Aid Sanitary Napkin' Groups: A Small Step, Giant Leap to End 'Menstrual Shame'

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Shanghai University students installed a “Mutual-aid Sanitary Napkin Box” on the campus and said no to “menstrual shame.” This act quickly spread into and gripped several other university campuses in China. (bjnews.com)

*To mark March 8, the International Women's Day, ICS TRANSLATIONS will release a set of three issues highlighting the women's or gender issues in China today. The current issue No. 26 is the first in the 3-part series – Series Editor.

Summary: Women must openly “talk about menstruation,” In order to let women “talk confidently about menstruation” and to pay attention to “her problems”, we need to break away from the taboo thinking and we must treat “menstruation” a normal, everyday issue.

Article title in Chinese: 告别“月经羞耻”，“互助卫生巾”只是一小步

Article source: <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/opinion/2020/10/28/782389.html>

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The ICS is an interdisciplinary research institution, which has a leadership role in the promotion of Chinese and East Asian Studies in India. ICS Translations aims to introduce views of the P R China scholars, analysts, and commentators coming from across disciplines.



Image: Mutual-aid Sanitary Napkin box

Source: bjnews.com

“For emergency use, take and replace one sanitary napkin. Keep it well-stocked. Any brand is welcome!” A news report “Sanitary Napkins Mutual Aid Box in Universities Campuses” published in The Beijing News today has sparked heated discussions all around.

Inspired by the movement’s founder Ms. Liang Yu, a female student at Shanghai’s East China University of Political Science and Law placed sanitary napkin mutual aid boxes in the washrooms all over the academic complex in the campus, so that women on the campus can use sanitary napkin in emergency. And she placed the sanitary napkin aid boxes at a spot where they were easily and openly visible. “Her act was aimed at shaming those who see menstruation as “shameful,” the student said.

As was expected, Sanitary Napkins Mutual-aid Box initiative stirred up a huge controversy. But its initiator Liang Yu frankly admits: “Seeing is believing or the beginning of

change. Menstrual shame will gradually get desensitized as we discuss it more and more.” This is 2020, are we still ashamed to say the word “menstruation” aloud? The answer, regrettfully, is yes.

Menstruation is the most natural physiological phenomenon. For women who are nearly half of the world’s population, menstruation accompanies more than half of their life journey. After entering the industrialized society, according to available data, on average a woman’s menstrual cycle starts at age 12 and lasts till she is 50. In her lifetime, a woman experiences menstrual cycle for about 400 to 500 times, which amounts to approximately seven years.

For more than 2,500 days of her life, during the monthly period, a woman has to use approximately 10,000 sanitary napkins and repeatedly encounter for 10,000 times the embarrassment of “menstrual shame”.

In her student days, during physical education class when suddenly it is the monthly period time, she dare not ask the male teacher for leave as she feels too embarrassed to say “My periods have come”; or during the class hours, she must take out a sanitary napkin very carefully from her school bag, hide it in her sleeves and then rush towards the bathroom.

At her work place or during office hours, a woman must always pay attention to her menstrual cycle calendar, which is recorded in the periods-tracker-app, worrying that her trousers might get dirty.

The taboo surrounding the word – menstruation, affects all aspects of a woman's life. While buying sanitary napkins, the shopkeepers will deliberately use black plastic carry bags to pack them. In everyday parlance, people employ all kinds of weird expressions and slangs, such as *Aunt Flo*, *periods*, *monthly cycle*, *one's friend*, *that time of the month*, *off-days*, *that thing* etc. and so on, but won't speak aloud the “unspeakable” two Chinese characters “月经” *Yuèjīng* or menstruation! Facing “public camera” or in public view, a woman openly using the word “menstrual period” is considered as “improper” and “indecent.”



Image: Polycystic Ovary Syndrome
Source: bjnews.com

Since the beginning of this year (2020), topics such as “menstruation” is “her problem” etc

have led to heated debates in the mainstream media. As female health workers were rushed to Wuhan to help fight the Covid-19 pandemic, several loving bloggers donated menstrual supplies to aid the female medical staff in Hubei province; by mid-year, supply of bulk sanitary napkins sparked off a huge controversy on the topic of “menstrual poverty”. And now, Sanitary Napkins Mutual-aid Box “movement” has once again brought alive the issue of “menstrual shame” to the focus of public debate.

It cannot be denied that hiding or not talking openly about the topic of menstruation is deeply influenced by traditional thinking. For women, the fact that they “cannot talk about menstruation” is taken for granted. And the reason why people cannot be “desensitized” is to a large extent due to the lack of “Sex Education”. Stigmatizing and ridiculing women's physiological phenomenon, to some extent can be seen as a by-product derived from talking about “Sex” as a taboo.

The tendency to hide or not talk about menstruation is not unique to any one country or region, it is a worldwide phenomenon. In other countries also, phrases such as Aunt Flo, Shark Week (difficult week), Girl Time, Monthly Visitor etc., are used instead of menstruation. In the Indian documentary – *Period. End of Sentence* – by Rayka Zehtabchi, which won the 2019 Oscar in the Best

Documentary (Short Subject) category, when the men in Indian villages were asked “what is menstruation,” some shook their heads and said they didn’t know what menstruation was. Some men gave the outrageous answer: “menstruation is a disease that affects mostly women...”



Image: Award winning Documentary by Rayka Zehtabchi (2019)
Source: youtube.com

Spoofing women as biological creatures who you never should dare to provoke, who bleed every month and still don't die; believing menstruation to be blue in colour as shown in the advertisements; that it comes only for one-day every time and that there is only one napkin in a sanitary napkin box... all such notions speak volumes about the problems women are facing.

In the Korean TV sop *It's Ok to Be A Little Sensitive*, the male supervisor thinks that menstruation can be held back, and so scolds a female employee for requesting to be allowed to use the washroom because of her periods. In this instance, the ignorance also leads to the worsening of the prejudice against menstruation, i.e., it is “dirty”. This makes it

even more difficult for women to dispel “menstrual shame”.



Image: K-drama: *It's Okay to be...* (2018)
Source: bloggingwithdragons.com

But with time, bit by bit, change is happening. In 2015, Kiran Gandhi, a British woman ran a London marathon while on her periods and thus broke the menstrual taboo. Fu Yuanhui, popularly known as “honghuang girl” [the Chinese teenage swimmer who became famous at the 2016 Olympics in Rio and overnight became Chinese national youth icon. A few days later, following her lackluster performance in the 4x100 meter medley relay, during an interview said, “I got my periods yesterday and so I am a bit exhausted today” – *Translator*]. Many commended her for openly and candidly talking about menstruation. She had broken the taboo in sports of not talking about menstruation.



Image: Kiran Gandhi

Source: people.com



Image: Fu Yuanhui

Source: womenofchina

Furthermore, in this University Sanitary Napkins Mutual-aid Box initiative, we were pleasantly surprised to see this kind of mutual-aid messages: "This is the first time I am buying sanitary napkins, I am a man, a son, a husband and a father of a woman." The man who sent the message further wrote: Please use my message as you please!



Image: Fu Yuanhui talks about her periods

Source: youtube.com

Some recent Chinese articles on the theme:

多囊卵巢表现≠多囊卵巢综合征

月经不规律、肥胖、多毛及早就诊

Polycystic Ovary Symptoms/ Polycystic Ovary Syndrome: Irregular menstruation, Obesity, Hirsutism and Early Consultation

<https://www.bjnews.com.cn/detail/161085663815305.html> 2021/01/17



Image: "Honghuang girl"

Source: en.people.cn

Paying attention to women's plight, striving for women's equality and their rights, are not empty slogans. Talking about "her problem," breaking the so-called "menstruation" taboo, desensitizing "menstrual shame", helping women in poverty stricken regions to break away from "menstrual poverty," it is just the beginning...

全球首例！苏格兰通过法案为所有女性
免费提供月经用品

The World's First – Scotland to distribute free menstrual supplies to all women

<https://www.bjnews.com.cn/detail/160627515715295.html> 2020/11/25

武汉一高校女厕出现卫生巾互助盒

学生：旨在打破月经羞耻

Sanitary Napkin Mutual-aid Box appears in a Wuhan University Campus: The aim is to end "menstrual shame," says a woman graduate

<https://www.bjnews.com.cn/detail/160578234015552.html> 2020/11/19

*The views expressed here are those of the original author and not necessarily of the translator or of
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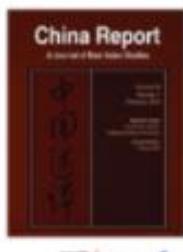
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