

A narrative inquiry into women's experiences of menstruation at the workplace in Namibia

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Abstract

Background. Menstruation's effects on workplace productivity and its impact on women's careers are rarely discussed in public discourse. This paper presents an analysis of thirteen women's accounts of their menstrual experiences at work.

Objectives. The study aimed to understand women's lived experiences of menstruation in the workplace in Namibia and to make recommendations for best practices and policy formulation to help female employees cope with menstruation at work in Namibia.

Materials and Methods. The study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological narrative inquiry research design, and thirteen participants working in various institutions and companies in Namibia were selected through a snowball sampling procedure. Individuals who agreed to participate in the study were given a link to a Google document containing reflective questions.

Results. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the narratives. The study findings show that most participants experienced various menstrual-related symptoms ranging from unbearable physical pain or discomfort to heavy bleeding and psychological distress. Menstruating women face workplace challenges, such as a lack of emergency sanitary products and unsupportive superiors.

Conclusions. Based on the narratives analyzed, we conclude that menstrual-related symptoms affect work productivity. Participants highlighted that they perform better and are considerably more productive on their non-menstrual days. Participants advocated for a shift in policy to allow flexibility to work from home or get menstrual leave when experiencing severe menstrual symptoms. Such a change will go a long way in making the workplace more accommodating to women.

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Key words: menstruation, psychological distress, workplace, experiences.

Acknowledgments: we are most grateful to the participants in the study who took the time to share their experiences of menstruation at the workplace. Appreciation to the University of Namibia Research, Innovation & Development and the Faculty of health sciences & Veterinary Medicine for incurring Article Processing Charges.

Contributions: ENM, HM, HH, design of the work; ENM, HH, acquisition and analysis/interpretation of data for the study, draft of the work; ENM, HH, HM, revision of the work; HM, conception of the original idea. All the authors approved the final version to be published.

Conflict of interest: the authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

Funding: this project was self-funded.

Ethical approval and consent to participate: UNAM's Research Ethics Committee (UREC) granted ethical approval with reference: RUC0005 for this study. Researchers explained the nature and purpose of the study to the participants and ensured voluntary participation.

Availability of data and material: data and materials are available by the authors.

Received for publication: 22 February 2023.

Accepted for publication: 8 March 2023.

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Journal of Public Health in Africa 2023; 14:2587

doi:10.4081/jphia.2023.2587

Introduction

Menstruation is "a cycle of changes that the uterine endometrium undergoes each month in response to the waxing and waning of ovarian hormones in the blood".¹ It is a biological process that occurs every 3-5 weeks, and as such, it may affect 'one's welfare and work behaviour'.² Menstruation is inevitable for most women, beginning at age 12 and ending with menopause at age 49 or later. Globally, research has focused on the general health of women and young girls; however, the issue of menstruation in the workplace has received very little attention. The topic of how menstruation affects productivity at work and its impact on women's careers is rarely discussed or studied. Governments, United Nations, non-governmental organisations and advocacy groups have mainly focused on menstrual health management and less on the influence of menstruation on women's professional lives. Furthermore, efforts and research have primarily been towards adolescent girls and rural women and the availability or affordability of sanitary products for these groups.³

Namibia lacks information regarding women's experiences with menstruation in the workplace. Despite rich information demonstrating women's difficulties during menstruation, their menstrual experience at work has received minimal or no attention. According to Sang *et al.*,⁴ many professional environments, including academia, comprise long working hours, rigorous efforts, and complete commitment to the job. To fill gaps in the literature, we deemed it necessary to study this delicate yet complex topic focusing on female employees at various institutions in Namibia.

The University of Namibia, where the three authors are based, has an occupational health and safety policy but does not mention

menstruation at work.⁵ Equally, the Namibian labor legislation, as per Namibian Labour Act 11 of 2007, is silent on menstruation. This may be due to the fact that there are insufficient evidence-based findings on the subject to justify the inclusion of a clause in institutional policies, hence necessitating the investigation. While the literature on the management of menstruation is expanding, limited research has paid attention to how menstruation impacts the lives of working women. This qualitative narrative research study aimed to analyze and understand the stories of working women's experiences of menstruation at the workplace.

The study further invited participants to suggest practices and policy provisions for assisting female employees in Namibia as they manage menstruation at the workplace. As such, the study focused on the menstrual experiences of female personnel at various institutions in Namibia's public and private sectors and made recommendations for how work-related policies can make provision for them to manage better at work when affected by menstruation. The following research questions guided the study: i) what are the women's experiences of menstruation while at work in Namibia?; ii) what practices and policy provisions can be implemented to assist female employees in Namibia in coping with menstruation at work?

Materials and Methods

Ethical consideration

UNAM's Research Ethics Committee (UREC) granted ethical approval with reference: RUC0005 for this study. Researchers explained the nature and purpose of the study to the participants and ensured voluntary participation. Using codes such as P[1] instead of participants' names ensured anonymity.

Research design

This qualitative and interpretive study utilized a phenomenological narrative inquiry approach to explore women's lived experiences of menstruation at work. Phenomenology is concerned with human experiences and was deemed appropriate for gaining access to and representing accounts of the experiences of menstruating women at work to broaden gendered perceptions of the body.⁶ According to Qutoshi,⁷ phenomenology is a method of inquiry "used to understand the lived world of human beings at a conscious level". Narrative inquiry is the art of "telling stories – our own and others' – to make sense of events [as] an integral part of our lives".⁸ In this study, we use an experienced-centered narrative research approach to listen to participants, write and reinterpret their experiences, and equally their proposal for an ideal work environment to help them cope better.

Table 1. Themes.

Themes	Subthemes
1. Menstruation experience at the workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical discomfort/pain • Heavy menstrual flow (bleeding)
2. Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accidental staining • Lack of resources • Lack of support from superiors
3. Impact on work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological distress/ mental health • Productivity
4. Call for change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy • Provision of sanitary products

Participants

The study population comprised female employees from different institutions and organizations in Namibia. A snowball sampling procedure was used to recruit participants. Snowball sampling involves selecting a few people who fit the researchers' interests and using those participants to identify additional participants until participants are sufficient.⁹ Thirteen female employees from various institutions and companies in Namibia made up the study's sample. Their job categories ranged from academics, administrators, development planners, managers, and nursing practitioners, of the age between 22 and 50 years.

Data collection and procedure

The study used narrative inquiry whereby the researchers posted reflective questions to the participants and asked them to respond by writing narratives of their experiences of menstruation at work. Researchers shared with the willing participants, the link to a Google document containing reflective questions.

Data analysis

The researchers engaged with the text expressed by the participants through their narratives of how they experience menstruation at work. The first step of analysis involved reading through each and acquiring a sense of the story to identify key themes and patterns. The themes were then integrated and organized using thematic analysis.

Results

In this section, we present the findings concerning women's experiences of menstruation at work. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: menstruation experiences at the workplace, challenges experienced, impact on work and proposed changes in policy and practice. Table 1 represents the four themes and subthemes that stood out from the narratives.

Respondents' experiences of menstruation at work

The participants gave their accounts of how they experience menstruation at work and how it affects them. Two subthemes emerged from this theme: physical discomfort and heavy flow.

Physical discomfort due to menstruation

The subtheme of physical discomfort ran through seven participants' narratives as shown below.

According to P[2], "*menstruation can be quite painful, especially at the beginning of the period. Headaches and abdominal pain are some painful experiences I go through*".

Similarly, P[3] says, "*A menstrual period is uncomfortable at work, especially when it is accompanied by pain. It always affects*

my mood and work”.

P[9] describes her experience as: *“Hectic. Due to heavy bleeding, I am constantly running to the toilets, which are not clean and are disgusting. The pain is unbearable, especially when I forget to take my medication, and this puts me off completely”*.

P[9] describes an incident in which she experienced extreme physical discomfort at work, saying, *“the pain was unbearable, I started sweating and shaking, I had no painkillers, I had to lock myself in the office for a while”*.

P[10] said: *“The bleeding is too heavy, and it comes with excruciating pain, which leads to discomfort and emotional imbalances, which hinders my work at the office”*.

P[7] describes how she once had to attend an important meeting while experiencing menstrual pain. She said, *“I had to attend a very important meeting with painful periods”*.

Heavy bleeding

In addition to pain, respondents reported experiencing heavy bleeding. Below, are their stories:

“Although, as women, we are designed to have monthly periods, it is not a good experience when at work. I have noticed that the period flow also changes as I age. In my youth, it was normal flow with no problems, but now, from 40 years up, it gets heavy and even accompanied by clots. There is no peace of mind when on my period nowadays. It affects work negatively because of the constant worry of accidental staining. I ‘don’t want to be in the office, especially on day 2 of my period. Sometimes I confuse these heavy flows with a miscarriage. It’s really heavy”. P[1]

P[2] said: *“the bleeding is too heavy so that if I move around a lot or sit for too long, the blood might overflow and leak through my clothes. I tried all kinds of pads to prevent leaks but no change. I even had to use a diaper, but this did not help either”*.

“... It’s hectic, constantly running to the toilets (due to heavy bleeding) that are not very clean and are disgusting”. [P9]

“The bleeding is too heavy and comes with excruciating pain, which leads to discomfort and emotional imbalances in the office”. [P10]

Challenges experienced during menstruation at the workplace

The second theme derived from the data collected mainly addresses challenges experienced by women when dealing with menstruation at work. From this theme, three subthemes emerged: accidental staining, resources, and lack of support.

Accidental staining

Participants shared their experiences of having stained their clothes or even chairs with menstrual blood while at work. Below, participants P[1], P[2] and P[11] give their accounts of this harsh reality:

“I felt the flow getting heavier while in class teaching. I got worried because I knew the pad wouldn’t hold it for long once the tampon was soaked, so I had to stop the session and postpone the lesson to another day”. P[1]

I was in a meeting that was taking longer than expected. After three hours, I got up to go to the bathroom and change my pad. I realized that my pad had leaked, and when I came back to the meeting, I realized that I had messed on my chair and there were blood drops on the floor that dropped as I walked to the bathroom. It was so embarrassing because there were many people in the meeting. [P2]

My periods started unknowingly, and I stained my dress; luckily, junior colleagues noticed the stains and informed me, so I had to go home and change and return to work. It was embarrassing, I

had no choice but to face the situation. P[11]

Resources

Another challenge brought forth by the respondents in this study is lack of resources, women require to manage their menstruation safely. Two participants, P[5] and P[12] had this to say about inadequate resources:

“There was a time when my period came earlier than expected, and I didn’t carry any tampons with me. It was a disaster, and I had to leave work before knock-off time”. P[5]

“There was no water, and using the toilet became impossible”. P[12]

Lack of support from superiors

Having unsupportive managers is another example of the challenges emerging from the women’s stories. Here is a noteworthy account from one participant:

“There was a time my supervisor requested me to attend an interview as secretary, and I refused due to periods because I couldn’t stay for an hour without visiting a bathroom. I was given a warning for refusing work. According to him, menstruation cannot be an excuse”. P[10]

Impact on work

Below are the participants’ accounts of how menstruation impacts their performance at work. Two subthemes emerged from this theme: psychological distress and work productivity.

Psychological distress

Some participants indicated that they find working on their menstruating days stressful. They said:

“I find it very stressful when I have to go to work on my heavy days because I never know what to expect”. [P2]

Work is annoying when I am on periods. The mood swings... especially the first three days, I am always moody compared to my free days” [P3]

“...it is stressful and difficult to concentrate at work. Interpersonal relations with other staff are also disrupted during those periods despite efforts to work around the situation” [P11]

“I find menstruation to be uncomfortable and taxing mentally and emotionally”. [P13]

Work productivity

The current study’s findings show that participants are less productive at work on their menstrual days than on non-menstrual days.

P[11] said: *“I work better when I’m not on my periods because I concentrate more and relate with others effectively. But during menstruation, I prefer being alone and working in isolation, which is very difficult since my work mostly involves collaborating with others. Sometimes, I have to go on fieldwork which has its challenges, such as no place to change sanitary pads or tampons or no water to wash hands before and after changing pads”*.

P[3] shares similar sentiments that: *“I am more productive [on non-menstrual days] compared to menstrual days as there are less frequent trips to the bathrooms to freshen up or change pads”*.

According to P[10], *“During menstruation days, especially the first three days, I am always moody compared to my non-menstrual days, which negatively affects service provision and accuracy”*.

Call for change

Participants in this study advocate for a shift in policy and the provision of sanitary products to make the workplace more accommodating to female employees. Two subthemes emerged from this section and are discussed below.

Provision of menstrual products

Some participants call for workplaces to have menstrual products in bathrooms or menstrual corners to cater for emergencies. Below, the participants share their views.

P[11] said: *“Have a corner or place where female staff can quickly grab sanitary pads and tampons in case periods start unexpectedly”*.

P[12] shared the same sentiments: *“The availability of sanitary pads can assist on days when one does not have pads on them”*.

P[5] added: *“Workplaces should have emergency rooms where tampons are provided and places to rest when the bleeding becomes severe”*.

Policy changes

The respondents recommended best practices and policy changes to help female employees in Namibia cope better with menstruation. Some respondents, such as P[1], P[2], and P[3] are, suggesting for flexibility in their work days, saying:

“Flexibility to allow working from home on days that the bleeding is really heavy without submitting a sick leave note. This is because if one has to submit a sick leave every month, it does not look good on someone’s job profile”. P[1]

“I wish my employer could allow me to work from home on days when my bleeding is too heavy, especially on the second or third day”. P[2]

“An option to work from home”. P[3]

On the other hand, some participants call for a leave day or two as they find that working while on their periods, especially the first two days, can be a nightmare. Below, some participants make their suggestions regarding menstrual leave, with participant P[10] even giving an example of the menstrual leave policy in Zambia.

“In other countries like Zambia, women working in public institutions are given one day off each month, taken on the first day of her period. Therefore, it is recommended that the same be done in our country to help women deal with our pain and discomfort at home”. P[10]

“Women should be allowed to take special leave on certain menstruating days. Or painkillers should at least be made available”. P[8]

“I would suggest at least two days off in the first two heavy bleeding days of one’s cycle”. P[13].

Discussion

The study’s findings indicate that women suffered physical discomfort due to menstruation. Corroborating with this, Griffin *et al.*¹⁰ state that menstrual complaints are common and include pain, abnormal bleeding, and menstrual irregularity. Sometimes the pain experienced can only be eased with an intervention such as taking pain relief medicine. For some participants, even with medication, it is challenging to work in the early days of their period; however, they feel pressure to attend to work responsibilities, despite being unable to engage meaningfully.⁵

Looking at the results, it is evident that most participants

experience heavy menstrual bleeding (HMB), which by definition is bleeding that exceeds 80ml per menstrual cycle when measured objectively.¹¹ A Previous study found that some women experience heavy bleeding that is not easy to control in the workplace (Sang *et al.*).⁵ Similarly, Winters *et al.*¹² assert that HMB is one of the common gynecological conditions in primary and secondary care.

Numerous participants mentioned accidentally staining their clothing or seats when describing the impact of menstruation at work. Similarly, Sang *et al.*¹³ showed respondents’ concerns regarding the appearance of menstrual blood on their clothing and accidentally leaking into chairs, which became a reality for this study’s respondents. Even though many women have experienced the occasional accidental menstrual blood stain, one can only imagine the horror when it occurs in public, as in the instance of P[2]. Many women thus live in constant fear and anxiety of possible accidental staining due to heavy bleeding.¹⁴

Inadequate resources may impede women’s ability to engage in economic activities and subject menstruating women to discomfort, embarrassment, and in some circumstances, loss of work.¹⁵ In Namibia, for example, municipal occurrences such as unscheduled water outages negatively affect menstruating women at work due to the inaccessibility of sanitation facilities. As shared by participant P[12], lack of water is a concern as water availability at a workplace is significant in helping women deal positively with menstruation.¹⁴ Lack of menstrual products in the workplace has also been noted as a problem in the event of an emergency, as expressed by participant P[5]. The accounts given by this study’s participants substantially corroborate the findings of Sang *et al.*¹³ that lack of support services at workplaces trigger women’s anxiety over menstruation while at work.

Given the accounts described by participants in this study, it is no surprise that many women experience psychological distress due to menstruation. Research shows that women with menstrual-related problems were significantly more likely to report sad, nervous, restless, hopeless or worthless feelings.¹⁶ Another study found a significant statistical association between HMB and symptoms of psychological distress.¹⁷ As participants P[2] and P[11] stated, they found it stressful and challenging to focus on work during their menstrual days. P[3] expressed how mood swings hinder her work when menstruating. The results thus suggest that menstrual-related symptoms produce psychological distress in menstruating women. Research has shown that menstrual-related signs have a negative impact on work productivity.¹⁸⁻²⁰ The effect of menstrual-related symptoms on work productivity is considerable, and presenteeism is less desirable than absenteeism.¹⁷ Most participants in the current study highlighted that they perform better and are considerably more productive on non-menstrual days.

Many women can function at full capacity even when experiencing their monthly periods. However, a significant percentage of women experience debilitating menstrual symptoms, and it is these women that need to be excused from work or would need to request menstrual leave. As evident from our findings, flow can be heavy, necessitating frequent trips to the restroom, or the pain might be extreme, making it nearly difficult to work or communicate with co-workers or clients. Participants in this study believe that the opportunity to work from home on days when a woman is experiencing heavy flow or agonizing pain would substantially improve their life and well-being. In many cases of menstruation, the symptoms typically persist a few days every month;¹³ therefore, a suitable provision of home working from an employer could have positive results.

Addressing women’s concerns about menstruation at work

through policies would open up the much-needed dialogue to debunk the many myths and taboos associated with menstruation. Silence about menstruation can lead to ignorance and neglect, even at the policy level.²¹ While this is a possibility – or even an existing practice – in developed countries, it may be a long shot in many developing countries, including Namibia. A menstruation corner in workplaces may be a distant dream in a country that only recently eliminated taxes on sanitary pads as per the Tax Amendment Act of 2022.²² The tax exemption on feminine hygiene products is excellent, but more must be done. As Sommer *et al.*¹⁵ point out, lack of convenient services for managing menstruation, advocacy, and workplace policies might impede women's ability to engage in everyday economic activities and expose menstrual women to discomfort, embarrassment, and in some circumstances, loss of work.

Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion, this study highlighted women's voices as they narrated their menstrual experiences in the workplace. Most participants experienced various menstrual-related symptoms such as unbearable physical discomfort or pain, heavy bleeding, and psychological distress. Furthermore, participants mentioned that they live in continual dread of accidentally staining clothes or chairs, which became embarrassing for some. Most participants also reported that they experience heavy flow; it is, however, unclear if they have existing or chronic underlying reproductive health issues; thus, further research is needed to establish that. Lack of resources and unsupportive superiors make the workplace un conducive for menstruating women. Menstrual-related symptoms and challenges experienced negatively affect work productivity since participants perform better and are considerably more productive on their non-menstrual days. Participants in the study are thus suggesting a policy change to allow flexibility to work from home or get menstrual leave when menstrual symptoms are severe. This will help female employees have positive experiences and remain productive at work. Namibia can learn from countries that have taken the lead in implementing flexibility in working days or menstrual leave days for women.

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this is the first study in Namibia to examine women's experiences with menstruation in the workplace. The researchers believe this study's findings are just the tip of an iceberg and that a more extensive study would reveal numerous issues. Based on this study's findings, the researchers recommend that a comparative study be undertaken on a bigger scale so that policymakers can use the results to formulate legislation about menstruation in the workplace.

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