

SYMPOSIUM: MENSTRUAL JUSTICE IN MOTION /
SIMPOZIJUM: MENSTRUALNA PRAVDA U POKRETU

PREFACE / PREDGOVOR

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SYMPOSIUM ON MENSTRUAL JUSTICE
IN MOTION

When I received the invitation to the workshop “What Stands for Menstrual (In)Justice” in Belgrade, I was intrigued. I have been following the global menstrual movement for years, but admittedly Serbia had not been on my radar. I should not have been surprised – the menstrual movement is gaining strength across the world. I have been able to connect with inspiring menstrual justice activists from Colombia, Fiji, the Philippines, Taiwan, Turkey, and many other places. While some early menstrual hubs were in South Asia and East Africa,¹ we are now witnessing the emergence of a global movement.

The networks, feminist collectives and groups are too numerous to list, and it is impossible to do their work justice, but I want to highlight a few. In Latin America, the Escuelas Menstruales and Emancipadas have been focusing on menstrual literacy by conducting workshops, trainings, and convenings geared towards raising self-awareness, body literacy and wellbeing. They understand body literacy as powerful and political and connect it to the notions of sovereignty, autonomy, and dignity, including decoloniality and resistance to Western hegemonic ideas and conceptions of menstruation. In India, the Safai Karmachari Andolan, the movement of manual scavengers and Dalit feminists among them, has been mobilizing around menstrual justice. They have built a platform involving Dalit and non-Dalit women across more than ten Indian states, which is convened by women in the communities. While menstruation has long been silenced and stigmatized, across these communities, women were not only willing but eager to reflect on their menstrual experiences in

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1 Bobel, C., 2019, *The Managed Body: Developing Girls and Menstrual Health in the Global South*, Cham, Springer International Publishing.

a patriarchal and casteist society. In these and many other contexts, the conversations then flowed naturally to related issues including pregnancy, delivery, breastfeeding, (in)fertility, menopause, relationships, consent, bodily autonomy, experiences of violence and abuse, early marriage, and others. They often extend to gender roles, experiences of discrimination, relationships with spouses, parents and in-laws, providing women with the opportunity to reflect on and transform these relationships. These are instances where we see the transformative potential of menstrual justice.

Looking at the movement more broadly, in its recent report on menstrual justice, *Scarlet Murmurations*, Irise International understands menstrual justice as a “rights-based, intersectional approach that seeks to dismantle structural inequities related to menstruation and the menstrual cycle.”² This highlights three key notions of menstrual justice that are present in evolving mobilization efforts.

Menstrual activists see menstrual justice as linked to a broader social justice and gender justice agenda. They stress that the stigma surrounding menstruation is rooted in gender discrimination and systems of oppression that put women in an inferior position and deny them their agency and autonomy over their bodies. Moving forward, the movement would benefit from strengthening connections with other strands of gender justice and creating alliances with groups working on reproductive justice, gender-based violence, labor rights and gender disparities, and environmental justice, among others. The symposium in Belgrade featured human rights activists from Serbia and Croatia facilitating such embeddedness in broader justice movements.

To align menstrual justice with gender justice, many activists also demand explicit focus on intersectionality that takes into account broader systems of oppression and discrimination such as caste, race, ethnicity, age, disability, gender identity, socioeconomic status, living and/or working in conditions of informality, among other factors. The mobilization among the Safai Karmachari women powerfully demonstrates that their lived experiences can only be understood through compounded stigma and discrimination of menstruation, gender, and caste. In Belgrade, the symposium stressed that the experiences of trans and non-binary people must be reflected in the menstrual movement.

Ultimately, the framing of menstrual justice stresses the notion of accountability and the need to address structural and systemic issues.

2 Lynch, I., Solomons, A., 2024, *Scarlet Murmurations: Advancing Global Menstrual Justice*, Sheffield: Irise International & Global Menstrual Collective, (<https://www.irise.org.uk/global-menstrual-justice>, 22. 4. 2025).

Activists highlight that menstrual justice is about transformative, societal change aimed at achieving a world where no one is disadvantaged because they menstruate.

To be sure, not all groups working on menstruation seek to bring about transformative change. Some ongoing work remains superficial and focused solely on the provision of menstrual products to facilitate the management of bleeding rather than addressing the underlying structural causes and societal dynamics that put people who menstruate at a disadvantage. The rapid growth of menstrual activism also bears risks – risks of being a mere moment rather than a sustained movement, risks of being a “sexy” but empty topic, and risks of human rights being instrumentalized and reduced to a slogan.³ That being said, I have had the privilege of engaging with movements that have staying power and seek to bring about transformative change.

In a world where we see sexual and reproductive health, rights and justice increasingly under pressure and witness an unprecedented backlash against gender justice, the menstrual movement offers hope. Menstrual stigma is insidious, deeply entrenched in societies and difficult to dismantle⁴ but we are beginning to see change across the world. Young people in the United Kingdom and elsewhere are increasingly comfortable talking about menstruation openly and expressing their needs.⁵ In Nairobi, Kenya, large billboards raise awareness of period shaming⁶ and activists confirm that menstruation has become much more visible in everyday life. In Taipei, Taiwan, activists established the Red House Period Museum which seeks to give menstruation visibility and get people to talk about their menstrual experiences.⁷ The contributions in this volume further promote our understanding on how to transform everyday injustices into menstrual justice.

3 Winkler, I. T., 2021, Menstruation and Human Rights: Can We Move Beyond Instrumentalization, Tokenism, and Reductionism?, *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law*, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 244–251.

4 Olson, M. M. *et al.*, 2022, The persistent power of stigma: A critical review of policy initiatives to break the menstrual silence and advance menstrual literacy, *PLOS Global Public Health*, Vol. 2, No. 7, pp. 1–23.

5 Tomlinson, M. K., 2025, *The Menstrual Movement in the Media: Reducing stigma and tackling social inequalities*, Cham, Springer Nature.

6 Simiyu, M., 2023, Senator Gloria Orwoba erects ‘period shaming’ billboard in Nairobi, *Nairobi News*, February 20, (<https://nairobinews.nation.africa/senator-gloria-orwoba-erects-period-shaming-billboard-in-nairobi/>, 22. 4. 2025).

7 Cheung, H., 2022, Talking about the period, *Taipei Times*, 5 July, (<https://www.taipei-times.com/News/feat/archives/2022/07/05/2003781159>, 22. 4. 2025).

The international workshop at the Union University Law School Belgrade entitled “What Stands for Menstrual (In)justice” was held in Belgrade, Serbia, on 22 November 2024. The Belgrade workshop revisited human rights, social justice, law, and menstruation in relation to women’s health, public health, tax law and policy, labor rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, psychology, sociology, health, and feminism. The symposium articles offered in the Journal cover some of the most interesting topics presented at the Belgrade workshop.

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