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REVIEW ARTICLE

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MISSING MENSTRUATORS: HOW ACTIVIST WORK HIGHLIGHTS A KNOWLEDGE GAP

Abstract: *With the global and cultural shifts challenging the silence and taboo, menstruation is becoming increasingly present in the media. By looking the work of artists and activists, this paper highlights the development of knowledge about menstruation. In promoting menstruation and period poverty, activists and NGOs have contributed to changes in schools and universities in Serbia and the Western Balkans. Some of these institutions now provide free menstrual products. The paper explores the role of digital activists and civil society as drivers of change, focusing on producing and sharing knowledge about menstruating bodies. They fill gaps created by the neglect or lack of interest of public health institutions. This draws on legal reforms, civil society contributions, critical menstrual studies, digital ethnography, and content analysis.*

Key words: Digital Activism, Menstrual Activism, Knowledge Production, Human Rights, Public Health Law, Serbia, Western Balkans.

1. Introduction

In the wake of a global shift towards anti-intellectualist sentiments and right-wing leaning politics, society is facing increased restrictions and diminished autonomy. In the Western Balkans, however, there is a growing interest in menstrual health among various civil society actors, journalists, feminists, and digital activists, many of whom have amassed large followings. In this paper, we will look at three examples of digital and menstrual activists: kriticki, Ženska Inicijativa, and the Gender Knowledge Hub. Through humor, art, podcasts, and research, they are bringing attention to important questions menstruators often ask but rarely find answers to.

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The title of this paper highlights a knowledge gap: the "missing menstruators." These are individuals who have been overlooked in research, education, and policy strategies. Half of the population in Serbia, those who have, are, or will experience menstruation, still lack access to up-to-date medical knowledge on how to approach their menstruating bodies holistically. While this does not imply that women and menstruators are incapable of caring for themselves, it highlights the lack of adequate information, medical attention, and support for them and their health needs. Menstrual knowledge is still passed down from older women, mothers, aunts, grandmothers, sometimes friends, based on individual experience, which is crucial during menarche; however, it is insufficient when confronted with one or multiple menstrual symptoms or disorders.[1] While we can recognize that pain is often a side effect or symptom of menstruation, it is unwise to normalize it as necessary, especially if an underlying disorder can cause infertility or be life-threatening if left untreated.

In recent years, several universities and schools in Serbia and the region Western Balkans region have adopted new policies regarding menstruation and its associated necessities, such as providing free menstrual products to students. These changes are also visible in public institutions and even in legislation, such as the reduction of taxes on menstrual products in the Western Balkans and Europe. For example, the 2022 the EU Reduced VAT Rates Directive introduced greater flexibility, allowing Member States to reduce VAT to 0% – a significant shift from the previous minimum of 5%.[2] These legislative changes can have a positive impact on menstrual poverty if implemented responsibly and in line with the local context and needs of the population.

Following the work of digital and offline activists and civil society actors, the line of knowledge they produce is essential for bringing crucial information to women and menstruators. This is especially relevant since the institutions responsible for public health often seem indifferent or are undervalued and lack the necessary capacity. The goal here is to explore the work of digital activists, civil society actors, and others, as catalysts

1 Common menstrual and reproductive health conditions include: polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) – irregular periods, high androgens, ovarian cysts; premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) – severe mood symptoms before period; premenstrual syndrome (PMS) – mood swings, bloating, cramps, fatigue; amenorrhea – absence of menstruation (primary or secondary); oligomenorrhea – infrequent menstruation; menorrhagia – heavy or prolonged bleeding; metrorrhagia – bleeding between periods; dysmenorrhea – painful periods (cramps, nausea, fatigue); and endometriosis – endometrial-like tissue grows outside uterus which causes pain, infertility.

2 Baert, P., 2025, *Taxation's impact on gender equality in the EU* (PE 767.188), European Parliamentary Research Service, (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2025/767188/EPRS_ATA(2025)767188_EN.pdf, 24. 5. 2025).

for change. The initiatives and activists discussed in this paper have been collaborating with their followers, sharing insights, personal stories, and exposing the broader impact of the patriarchal norms that perpetuate the menstrual taboo.

Since 2015 there has been a notable global increase in the visibility of menstruation and menstrual activism internationally and within Serbia and the broader Western Balkan region.[3] This increased visibility correlates with the expansion of digital platforms, particularly within feminist circles on social media networks, such as Instagram and Facebook. Particularly noteworthy is how these activists engage with their audiences, navigating the intersection between cultural traditions and influences from Western feminist discourses. A key turning point in this broader global movement occurred in 2015, designated by scholars as "the year the period went public", marked most prominently by Rupi Kaur's controversial images of menstrual blood, which also resonated within the Serbian public discourse. This moment catalyzed a reexamination of menstrual taboos and challenged the so-called "concealment imperative",[4] prompting critical engagement among younger generations. This analysis examines the transference of a cultural phenomenon from one context to another, both of which are characterized by a dominant public and political narrative of progressivism. However, beneath this surface of advancement, both contexts reveal persistent patriarchal structures that continue to constrain the lived experiences of women and menstruators on a daily basis.

Looking at the path of resistance and empowerment for all menstruators in this region, we can consider digital activists as examples of how women, individuals, and communities can come together to demand and advocate for legislative changes and bring an end to the stigmatization of menstruation.

2. Conceptual Framework

This paper adopts digital ethnography as its principal method of inquiry and analysis. John Postill defines digital ethnography as "an open-ended, immersive, inductive, versatile and reflexive approach to the study of digital phenomena that typically, but not necessarily, entails online and/or offline participant observation, as well as semi-structured interviews,

3 Bobel, C., 2015, The year the period went public, *Gender & Society Blog*, (https://gendersociety.wordpress.com/2015/11/12/the-year-the-period-went-public, 18. 5. 2025).

4 Wood, M. J., (In)Visible Bleeding: The Menstrual Concealment Imperative, in: Bobel, C. *et al.*, (eds.), 2020, *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 319–336.

archival work and other research methods."[5] The research draws specifically on Postill's concept of "flat methodology", which promotes a flexible and pragmatic application of diverse research techniques rather than privileging any single method. This approach enables the strategic use of online observation methods, including "lurking", to minimize the Hawthorne effect, whereby the researcher's presence could influence the subjects of study.[6] Consistent with Postill's analogy of the "digital magpie", the study engages in systematic collection of digital materials, including photographs, videos, audio recordings, social media posts, threads, and digital documents.[7] The method emphasizes an inductive, bottom-up process to enhance validity by prioritizing insider (emic) perspectives.

Over an extended period, data was compiled through the ongoing observation of digital and menstrual activism networks, including civil society organizations and non-governmental actors. Content from publicly available profiles was archived using Instagram's built-in tools, supplemented by screenshots where necessary, to allow for subsequent analysis. This unobtrusive method aims to capture activists' communication patterns and public engagement without disturbing the organic dynamics of the communities observed. The researcher's position is aligned with the typical user perspective, particularly that of a woman seeking accessible knowledge regarding menstrual health, bodily autonomy, and related rights. The inquiry focused on how discourses surrounding normalcy, bodily expectations, hormonal variations, and political narratives are constructed and disseminated within digital spaces.

2.1. ACTIVIST SELECTION AND CASE RATIONALE

To illustrate the multi-layered nature of menstrual activism in Serbia, the three distinct examples chosen operate at different levels of engagement: individual, community, and institutional. These cases have been selected to highlight the diverse strategies, approaches, and impacts that shape the broader discourse and actions in menstrual activism.

Kriticki[8] is led by activist and journalist Nina Pavicević, who provides a personal and media-savvy perspective and has a following of over

5 Postill, J., Doing digital ethnography: A comparison of two social movement studies, in: Cox, L. *et al.*, (eds.), 2024, *Handbook of Research Methods and Applications for Social Movements*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing, p. 145.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

8 *Kritički* (adverb/adjective in Serbian) translates as *critically* (adv.) in English, typically used to describe a mode of thinking or analysis marked by careful judgment and evaluation. For example: "To think critically" = *kritički razmišljati*.

113,000 users. With a direct and interactive approach to her audience, she responds to comments, questions, and requests on social media. The communication strategy, which emphasizes accessible language, facilitates the dissemination of feminist perspectives in formats easily understood by wider audiences. Her followers are mostly a younger audience, particularly millennials and Generation Z. Her feminist and journalistic background has helped prompt a public discussion on the menstrual discourse and its stigmatization. An example of her work is a newly released series titled *Kritički Kviz*.[9] The first episode was about menstruation. The quiz combines education and entertainment to promote destigmatization, and it has reached over 26,000 views on YouTube. Notably, the series includes almost exclusively men as participants – actors, podcasters, singers, and other public figures – who demonstrate a willingness to engage with the subject respectively and learn in a public forum.

The second example examines the Ženska Inicijativa initiative, which is a natural starting point, as it started a kind of snowball effect in menstrual activism. This student-led initiative was founded at the University of Novi Sad Faculty of Philosophy and has amassed a following of over 2,000 individuals. In 2021, this grassroots initiative successfully launched a project to secure donations of menstrual products for university students. Ženska Inicijativa also engages in educational efforts, disseminating informational posts concerning menstruation framed around the recurring question: "Did you know?" The visibility and impact of their work have been amplified through media coverage, and the Faculty of Philosophy has continued to support and develop the project beyond its initial one-year scope. Their trajectory offers insight into how grassroots educational initiatives can evolve into broader community engagement. As a result, similar initiatives have been established at more than twenty faculties across Serbia, as well as several in Kosovo and several at high schools.

Finally, the third example is the Gender Knowledge Hub, an organization committed to producing and applying gender-related knowledge across various sectors. With an audience of over 1,000 followers, the Hub aims to promote collaboration among institutions and non-profit, public, and private sector actors, to improve the development and implementation of gender-sensitive policies. Its work emphasizes knowledge transfer and practical policy solutions designed to achieve substantive gender equality. Their work exemplifies how community-based knowledge and lived experiences – which are often overlooked in policymaking – can be

9 Pavićević, N., 2024, E01 Kritički kviz o menstruaciji: Marko i Viktor iz Njuzneta (video episode), *Nina kritički* YouTube channel, 20 March, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXWy-nimicg, 18. 5. 2025).

mobilized to effect tangible change. By actively engaging in advocacy and producing research-driven publications, the organization positions itself as a key actor in the policy landscape.

2.2. CONTEXTUALIZING MENSTRUAL ACTIVISM

"Menstrual activism works to move embodiment from object to subject status – to see the body not as trivial or unimportant, but as something foundational, urgent, and politically relevant."[10] The menstrual activists presented in this paper are engaged in an ongoing effort to break down the stigma surrounding menstruating bodies while at the same time fostering a network of self-aware and empowered individuals. When Chris Bobel and Breanne Fahs speak of moving embodiment from object to subject status, we have to consider how the notions of purity, cleanliness, "a woman's problem" and the "curse" are imbued with essentialist notions that women and menstruators are somehow lesser.[11] Their bodies are portrayed as weak, always in flux, sometimes dirty, and need to be kept away from men and boys to not tarnish or harm them. Many cultures have come up with ritual practices aimed at keeping the "unruly" menstruating body under control and away from others.[12]

The menstrual activists discussed here are countering these narratives by offering compassion, respect, and understanding for the cyclical nature of menstruation, which has largely been overlooked in medical research due to its inherent variability. While some argue that feminism is redundant in "developed" nations, given the purported equality of men and women, the disparities revealed by this movement are troubling. Menstrual activism thus occupies a unique position within feminist and critical scholarship, urging a deeper exploration of the complexities surrounding gender and the body.[13]

Menstrual activism is neither a transient trend nor a novel phenomenon. As Bobel observes, the feminist menstrual activists of the 1960s, emerging alongside the second-wave feminist movement, redefined menstruation as a symbol of empowerment and solidarity among women. Instead of accepting the "curse", they reframed its meaning through art,

10 Bobel, C., Fahs, B., The messy politics of menstrual activism, in: Bobel, C. *et al.*, (eds.), 2020, *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1001–1018.

11 *Ibid*.

12 Buckley, T., Gottlieb, A., (eds.), 1988, *Blood magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*, University of California Press.

13 Bobel, C., Fahs, B., 2020, pp. 1001–1018.

filmmaking, music, poetry, and ritual.[14] This reframing is encapsulated in the words of Carol Hanisch, from 1969: "personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution."[15] This pivotal shift in perspective laid the groundwork for contemporary menstrual activism, which continues to challenge societal taboos and promote a broader, more inclusive discourse surrounding menstruation.

The continuation of these efforts is seen in the third-wave feminism, which found alignment with punk and anarchism's anti-capitalism and DIY ("do-it-yourself") ethos.[16] What is brought to the fore is some of the starting points of what we today understand by the term menstrual activism; it has been with us throughout the 20th century, and it is still with us at the end of the first quarter of the 21st century. This global and almost universal experience of menstrual stigma has affected most cultures throughout history, and today's activists are still doing the groundwork necessary for a more equal and equitable society.

As Bobel and Fahs assert, "[u]ltimately, we argue that menstrual activism has radical potential to deeply unsettle many assumptions about gender, bodies, political activism, embodied resistance, and feminist coalition-building."[17]

2.3. DIGITAL ACTIVISM IN SERBIA AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

Social media and online forums serve as important spaces for addressing significant gaps in knowledge regarding the menstrual cycle and menstrual health. To paraphrase Jacqueline Gaybor, social media and forums are a space to address a gap in knowledge about the menstrual cycle and menstrual health; they are also platforms to break the silence around menstruation and to make it visible to the public; and they are a tool for building a caring community among participants.[18]

Digital feminist activism in Serbia and Montenegro has a history going back decades, and what has been characteristic the entire time is raising issues (sometimes in very innovative ways) that were regularly

14 *Ibid*.

15 Hanisch, C., 1969, *The Personal Is Political*, Women of the World Unite: Writings by Carol Hanisch, (https://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html, 24. 5. 2025).

16 *Ibid.*, p. 1003.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 1001.

18 Gaybor, J., 2020, *Everyday (online) body politics of menstruation*, Feminist Media Studies, Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 898–913.

neglected and excluded from the public discourse, as irrelevant "women's issues".[19] Online activism has proven particularly effective for marginalized groups, including young people and women, who are often excluded from traditional forms of political engagement. Social media platforms allow these groups to build political identities and advocate for their interests in a manner that is typically not permitted within conventional political structures.[20] The younger generations have a growing number of tech-savvy women who enjoy and consume digital media as much as boys and men have in the past two decades. This means that the content that women started creating was catered to their needs. They wanted to have the interactions they missed as young girls or teenagers growing up, about their bodies, their purpose in life, questions that are often ignored or somehow considered rude, pointless, or inappropriate. Unfortunately, silencing has a negative effect, but not only does it make girls more insecure – it also can leave a vacuum which can be filled with anything: spreading wrong information or even using knowledge to manipulate and ridicule someone. This, in turn, can affect a person's health and bring shame to anyone who seeks medical care, mixing shame with rude comments or bad etiquette, and patients losing trust in the system, leaving them vulnerable to self-help guides, witchdoctors, or "healers" – who often seek to exploit insecurities.

Building upon the work of Hristina Cvetinčanin Knežević, who authored the first comprehensive study on digital activism in Serbia, her definition of digital activism is particularly relevant to this discussion. She defines digital activism as "the use of digital technologies to organize, mobilize, and promote social, political, cultural, and environmental changes."[21] This demarcation is significant for understanding the broader implications of digital activism. While numerous scholars have carefully dissected and defined digital activism both terminologically and conceptually, drawing out its exhaustive and exclusive meanings,[22] this work does not aim to delve into the semantic complexities of these definitions.

19 Cvetinčanin Knežević, H., 2024, *Digitalne Superheroine: Prvo istraživanje o digitalnom feminističkom aktivizmu u Srbiji i Crnoj Gori* (Digital superheroines: The first study on digital feminist activism in Serbia and Montenegro), Belgrade, Fondacija Jelena Šantić, p. 50, (https://fjs.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Digitalne-superheroine-WEB.pdf, 24. 5. 2025).

20 Cooper, K., 2023, *The Effectiveness of Online Activism: Who It Is Effective for, What Issues It Ss Effective for, and What Time Period It Is Effective for*, Honors thesis, University at Albany – State University of New York, p. 13, (https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/honorscollege_pos/42/, 24. 5. 2025).

21 Cvetinčanin Knežević, H., 2024, pp. 10–60, translated by author.

22 Joyce, M., (ed.), 2010, *Digital Activism decoded: The New Mechanics of Change*, New York/Amsterdam, International Debate Education Association, pp. 1–15.

In 2020, activists affiliated with the Gender Knowledge Hub in Serbia initiated a campaign focused on addressing menstrual poverty. The campaign sought to reduce the VAT on menstrual hygiene products from the current rate of 20% to 5%. This initiative highlighted the issue of gender blindness in public policies, emphasizing that basic necessities for women, such as pads and tampons, are often overlooked or categorized as non-essential luxuries. The campaign also called for the removal of the stigma surrounding menstruation and advocated for improved accessibility of hygiene products, particularly for women in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities.[23]

It is deeply concerning to discover that menstrual products are not classified as "essential goods" under current tax regulations, while other everyday items such as bread, milk, and even theatre tickets and newspapers are taxed at a much lower rate of 10%. Menstrual products, by contrast, are taxed at 20%. Rather than focusing solely on tax reductions, a more forward-thinking approach might involve the provision of free menstrual products in public institutions and workplaces, as has been successfully implemented in countries such as Scotland, New Zealand, Spain, Kenya, South Africa, France, and Canada. Such initiatives could shift the financial burden onto employers, thereby fostering a more equitable society by addressing the monthly expenses that women and menstruators are disproportionately subjected to due to biological differences. This challenge brings to mind the seminal works of Emily Martin (1991) and Caroline Criado Perez (2019), which question the pervasive notion of the male body as the societal norm. This "male body as standard" has had a profoundly negative impact on the quality of life for women and menstruators, effectively marginalizing them by imposing the monthly purchase of disposable products to maintain a semblance of normalcy in a society where menstruation remains stigmatized.[24]

A similar approach in campaigning is employed by Nikolina Nina Pavićević, who is behind the Instagram account kriticki, who actively engages with her followers by responding to their comments and queries. Through this engagement, she fosters an open dialogue on complex and often traumatic subjects, such as revenge pornography and obstetric violence. Such transparency and willingness to conduct an open dialogue help build trust and create a space where constructive discussions can be held on important topics, no matter how "combustible" they may be.[25]

Next to these two, we also have Ženska Inicijativa, an initiative which, since its establishment in 2022, has organized various forums, educational

23 Cvetinčanin Knežević, H., 2024, p. 52.

24 Wood, M. J., 2020, pp. 319–336.

25 Cvetinčanin Knežević, H., 2024, p. 58.

workshops, and provided support to the non-governmental sector in matters concerning reproductive health and youth advocacy. Notably, in 2023, the initiative launched Serbia's first free menstrual tracking mobile app, Pink Flag, with assistance from Vega IT. That same year, it successfully secured donations of menstrual products at five universities in Serbia, thereby supporting 16,500 students for an entire year. This initiative exemplifies how civil society campaigns can effectively mobilize and influence policy changes within public institutions – something that was previously considered improbable. And while the disposable product is not the perfect solution in a world characterized by an increasing amount of waste and pollution, it is a starting point to help those who are most vulnerable financially and in terms of health.

Despite the challenges it faces, digital activism has had, and continues to have, a profound impact on the development of laws and policies regarding women's rights around the world. Campaigns such as #MeToo have contributed to the establishment of more stringent laws against sexual harassment and abuse, and other campaigns have prompted governments to reevaluate and reform their policies on reproductive health and abortion rights.[26]

The process of digital empowerment has directly contributed to the strengthening of the feminist movement in the region, thereby establishing feminism as a relevant and contemporary framework that addresses the everyday issues of various generations. This is particularly true when feminist discourse is framed in a manner that is simultaneously educational, simple, humorous, empowering, and accessible.[27]

To conclude this part, I would like to reiterate the words of Bobel and Fahs: "We argue that feminists must challenge generations of silence and shame that obstruct quality menstrual health education. We must also promote a culture of curiosity and informed decision-making about caring for our bodies. Finally, we must counter the assumption that menstruation matters *only* to menstruators."[28]

3. Knowledge Distribution Through Menstrual Activism

"Menstruation unites the personal and the political, the intimate and the public, and the physiological and the socio-cultural. Menstruation is fundamental because it either facilitates or impedes the realization of a

26 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

28 Bobel, C., Fahs, B., 2020, p. 1001, (emphasis in original).

whole range of human rights."[29] When examining the compiled data and transforming it into analytical categories, the underlying patriarchal norms begin to surface. This is the point where human rights have to be considered. The key question becomes: how can we create a safe, destigmatized space for women and menstruators that not only provides structural support for their physical health, but also addresses the psychosocial aspects of menstruation? The potential harms of shame, stigma, and the concealment imperative – all of which are deeply rooted in patriarchal culture – must be addressed. How should we treat the "other" – the individual who does not align with the medical or cultural norm? Feminist scholars and philosophers have explored this issue throughout the 20th century: can the "other sex" become just one of the sexes, and if so – should it be done and how? While these theoretical concerns are important, it is critical to return to the empirical data and focus on the lived experiences of many women and menstruators in Serbia.

3.1. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND APPROACH TO DATA

This article draws on the digital ethnographic approach to explore how selected feminist actors use Instagram to engage with menstrual activism. Rather than applying a rigid coding scheme, the analysis developed organically through repeated readings of their content, allowing key themes to emerge over time. These themes were shaped by the broader methodological and conceptual framework introduced earlier and they serve as interpretive tools to better understand how activist messaging is crafted and shared in digital spaces. To respect the linguistic and contextual nuance, all examples are paraphrased and translated from Serbian into English. The tables that follow highlight selected posts, grouped into analytical categories, to show how menstrual activism unfolds across three levels of engagement: individual, community organizing, and institutional advocacy.

3.1.1. Individual-Centered Digital Engagement: kriticki

Menstruation is often depicted as something so powerful that it must be contained, yet in other instances, it is viewed as something so putrid that it should never be spoken of – particularly not in front of men. This "concealment imperative"[30] is prevalent in many of the examples presented below. In Serbia and the broader Balkan region, there are a

29 Winkler, I. T., Introduction: Menstruation as Fundamental, in: Bobel, C. *et al.*, (eds.), 2020, *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 15–25.

30 Wood, M. J., 2020, pp. 319–336.

number of rituals a woman or menstruator may practice to protect others from the perceived impurity, but the general expectation is that by keeping a distance, they are adhering to societal norms. One particularly revealing example is the compilation of comments in posts by kriticki while attempting to understand some of the most peculiar things women have been told they should not do while menstruating.

The table below contains comments in posts by kriticki and subsequently shared within the "highlights" section of the account. These examples illustrate specific experiences, narratives conveyed to women, and intergenerational beliefs regarding menstruation. The categories listed on the left-hand side have been formulated by the author for analytical purposes and do not represent the original wording of the individual comments.

Table 1. Inherited shame: Beliefs about menstruation shared by followers

Analytical category	**Paraphrased and translated examples**
Food	*Food prepared by menstruating women should not be eaten.*
Children	*Contact with small children will give them a rash – baby showers should not be attended, as to not harm the baby.*
Men	• *Fathers should not be informed of their daughter's menstruation.* • *Husbands should not know about their wives' menstruation; he will start hating her.*
Religion	• *Persons should not partake in liturgy when menstruating. The reasoning is that women are unclean; it is against God.* • *In Islam, women should not go to cemeteries, funerals, or mosques while menstruating, because menstruation is considered unclean (not the woman).*
Magic	*If you put a little bit of menstrual blood in a drink or coffee and give it to your partner, they will be yours forever.*
Gardening	*Flowers or plants will not grow if a menstruating woman does the gardening.*
Bathing	*Cleaning oneself, and especially washing hair, is considered bad during menstruation.*
Menstrual blood	*Menstrual products shouldn't be mixed with other trash because the menstrual blood is "cancerous".*
Tampons as sex toys	• *Virgins can't use tampons.* • *You're a whore if you use a tampon.* • *Tampons are products for self-pleasure but are sold as hygiene products.*

Analytical category	Paraphrased and translated examples
Medical professionals	• *Not believing girls about their pain, ignoring or not giving adequate or safe advice, and considering pain to be psychological in nature.* • *Advising a young woman under tremendous pain to put soap in their rectum to alleviate pain.* • *How will you give birth if you think menstruation is painful?* • *Interrogating young girls about pregnancy when they come for a check-up due to amenorrhea.* • *Shame about going to the gynecologist in a small town; unless you've given birth or are pregnant, you don't need to go there (even doctors have this attitude).*

While each of these categories warrants more critical and detailed analysis, particular attention will be given here to the "medical professionals" category. The initial premise of this paper was to examine how knowledge is generated and disseminated between menstrual and digital activists and their audiences. A recurring sentiment expressed by young individuals seeking medical assistance for conditions such as dysmenorrhea or polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is encapsulated in the regularly shared statement encountered in clinical settings: "Do not worry; it will resolve itself once you give birth." As exemplified above, for some women, this message implicitly discourages them from seeking medical attention until pregnancy occurs.[31]

The significant contribution of the digital activist whose work is presented here lies in her engagement with these individual experiences. By offering a platform and visibility to these stories, while simultaneously challenging harmful medical narratives, she fosters a critical discourse. Pavićević regularly produces brief videos summarizing such examples, providing candid support and referencing feminist scholarship or suggesting practical strategies to combat menstrual stigma. However, a methodological challenge arises for digital ethnographers, as some of these digital materials are ephemeral and are not systematically archived; responses posted months or years ago are no longer retrievable in her "highlights" section. Drawing upon my recollection and her current digital footprint, it is nevertheless apparent that her interaction with the audience remains

31 Similar dynamics of medical neglect and the stigmatization of menstruation can be observed beyond Serbia. For a closely related context, see the study conducted in Bosnia, which documents the lack of empathy and respectful treatment in healthcare settings: Kovačević, J., Spahić Šiljak, Z., 2025, *The price of impure blood: cultural and economic aspects of menstruation in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Sarajevo, TPO Fondacija, pp. 134–142.

sincere and impactful. This example offers a limited but telling insight into the experiences women often face when seeking medical care. Although doctor–patient abuse specifically in the context of menstruation has not yet been comprehensively examined in Serbia, a related phenomenon has been explored by Ljiljana Pantović, a medical anthropologist, who investigated the prevalence of obstetric violence in Serbia and highlighted the normalization of a doctor–patient dynamic in which the patient is presumed ignorant and discouraged from questioning medical authority.[32]

This dynamic reveals a broader pattern of misogyny in the provision of medical services in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the wider Balkan region, characterized by patronization, trivialization, and infantilization, practices disproportionately directed at female patients. Consistent with the analysis by Miren Guilló-Arakistain,[33] the biomedical model of menstruation upholds a normative and pathological framework that reinforces these dynamics. One critical observation from her work concerns the inherently fragmented perspective of biomedical science, which, by compartmentalizing medical knowledge and framing menstruation solely in terms of reproduction, systematically ignores broader systemic effects. As noted by Valls-Llobet, "[l]ittle attention is paid to what are termed peripheral or systemic effects such as its influence on metabolism, the osseous or vascular system, the skin, or mucosae."[34]

As an additional example of Pavicević's influence on public discourse is the launch of the YouTube series *Kritički Kviz* opens with an episode dedicated to menstruation. With over 26,000 views, the episode stands out precisely because it frames menstrual education as both engaging and socially relevant. The format blends humor and learning, inviting predominantly male guests, consisting of well-known public figures, such as actors, podcasters, and musicians, to respond to questions about menstruation. Their willingness to participate in an open, respectful dialogue about a topic traditionally considered taboo highlights a shift in how menstrual issues are entering mainstream, male-dominated digital spaces. This visibility marks a tangible step toward normalization and broader cultural recognition.

32 Parađanin Lilić, I., (ed.), 2022, E04 Akušersko nasilje: Ljiljana Pantović, doktorka antropologije (podcast), *Tampon Zona Podkast*, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJMrV1wKkrk&t=3312s, 18. 5. 2025).

33 Guilló-Arakistain, M., Challenging menstrual normativity: Nonessentialist body politics and feminist epistemologies of health, in: Bobel, C. *et al.*, (eds.), 2020, *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 891–902.

34 According to Guilló-Arakistain, M., 2020, p. 872.

3.1.2. Collective Action and Community-Based Organizing: Ženska Inicijativa

The work of Ženska Inicijativa (Women's initiative) serves as a compelling example of effective activism carried out both in digital spaces and through offline engagement. Through its online presence, it disseminates educational materials relating to the menstrual cycle, bodily autonomy, and the broader context of their advocacy efforts. Offline, its activism has been instrumental in campaigning for the provision of free menstrual products at universities and high schools throughout Serbia. Its activities encompass educational workshops, active media engagement, and organized donation initiatives.

Despite having low engagement with followers in its Instagram posts, the initiative's in-person workshops and direct project have led to the inclusion of free menstrual products at more than 20 faculties and several high schools in Serbia. In addition, it has developed a mobile application, PinkFlag, designed not merely as a menstrual calendar but as an educational platform aimed at informing users about upcoming campaigns, conferences, forums, and workshops. The initiative's work is underpinned by a feminist framework, emphasizing the reduction of menstrual poverty and the promotion of health and wellbeing among menstruators. One of the notable engagement strategies on its Instagram page involves posing accessible and engaging questions beginning with "Did you know?", effectively using social media tools to present concise and digestible information concerning menstrual health and relevant public policy issues.

Table 2. Challenging menstrual taboos:
"Did you know?" as a tool for raising awareness

Analytical category	**Paraphrased and translated examples**
Menstrual health and biology	• *Women have around 450 menstrual cycles in their lifetime.* • *Women usually lose around 30–40 ml of blood during one period.* • *Cervical fluid increases right before the period – these are called the moist days.* • *5–10% of women suffer from premenstrual dysphoric disorder.* • *80% of women have PMS, and 50% seek medical help for it.* • *Women lose around 5 months of sleep in their lifetime due to discomfort, anxiety, and fear during menstruation.*

Analytical category	Paraphrased and translated examples
Historical and cultural beliefs	• *In the early 20th century, people believed that academic study could harm women's reproductive health.* • *Period shaming: the stigma surrounding menstruation that makes people feel embarrassed or dirty.* • *Free bleeding: a movement where people menstruate without using products, often as a form of protest.*
Rights and policies	• *Scotland was one of the first countries to offer free menstrual products to everyone.* • *Spain introduced menstrual leave – paid time off for people experiencing painful periods.* • *In Germany, tampons are taxed at 19%, while books are taxed at 7% – some companies sell tampons as books to protest this.* • *In the U.S., women have lost federal protection of abortion rights.*
Advocacy and awareness	• *February 4th is World Cancer Day, used to highlight the fight against cervical cancer.* • *The number of menstrual products used per cycle (22).* • *What free bleeding or period poverty means.* • *How policies like menstrual leave or tax reduction affect real lives.*

Community-led and grassroots initiatives, combined with activism, play a critical role in raising awareness and providing knowledge to those previously unaware of menstrual health. Educational workshops, particularly those conducted at high schools, are prime examples of how these efforts can succeed, especially when state-level engagement or national sex and health education programs are lacking. These initiatives empower young people with essential information that might otherwise be inaccessible. As exemplified in the work of Fahs and Bacalja Perianes – "menstrual education is no longer simply focused on the need to 'manage menstruation' hygienically and periodically, rather menstruation as an opportunity to increase bodily autonomy and as central to closing the gender gap. As a result, doctors work in tandem with public health officials. Community organizers work in partnership with schools."[35]

The following categories are designed to reflect the complexity of the topics presented within the "Did you know?" format. They illustrate how knowledge production and dissemination can be effectively achieved via social media platforms when framed in accessible and non-technical

35 Fahs, B., Bacalja Perianes, M., Transnational Engagement: Designing an Ideal Menstrual Health (MH) Curriculum – Stories from the Field, in: Bobel, C. *et al.*, (eds.), 2020, *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 450.

language, as opposed to the often inaccessible biomedical terminology encountered in clinical settings. By drawing upon the diverse academic backgrounds of the activists, namely, degrees in Literature, Sociology, and Media Studies, the resulting material demonstrates a clear impact and quality, resembling what could be characterized as a form of educational pamphleteering.

3.1.3. Institutional Advocacy and Policy Engagement: Gender Knowledge Hub

The GKH is an organization that deals with complex issues of gender imbalance in economies, budgeting, unpaid labor, equity instead of equality (to denote that not everyone is the same), financial means of women in rural areas, with its research aimed at providing humanistic perspectives and feminist methods to the development of public policies.

Table 3. Menstrual policy and advocacy: educational and empowering posts

Analytical category	**Paraphrased and translated example**
Menstrual poverty	• *What is menstrual poverty*? • *Statistics show that more than 500 million women worldwide lack access to basic menstrual products.*
Economic dimension of menstruation	• *Campaign to reduce VAT on menstrual products.* • *How much does gender cost*? • *Prices are rising, but menstruation doesn't stop.*
Menstruation and stigma	• *Menstruation is not a synonym for shame, embarrassment, humiliation, secrecy, dirtiness, or ugliness.* • *Voldemort or menstruation – that which must not be named.*
Right to information and health	• *Menstrual health is a human right.* • *Toxic shock syndrome.* • *Reasons why you used a menstrual product longer than recommended or didn't change it on time.*
Access to free products in institutions	• *Free menstrual products at high schools.* • *In the pocket, in the sleeve, in the bag.*
Activism and campaigns	• *Campaign announcement: for the next 12 months, we will fight for menstrual justice.* • *Menstruation – so what? No more whispering.* • *The prices are rising, but the period doesn't stop.* • *Let's fight for menstrual justice.*

The Instagram posts from the GKH's menstrual advocacy work, illustrated above, emphasize a broad intersectional approach to public policy and gender equity. The content reveals how menstruation is not only a biological fact but also a deeply political issue tied to economic justice, access to health, and human rights. Posts highlight systemic problems such as menstrual poverty and the disproportionate financial burden placed on those who menstruate, especially in underserved rural areas. There is a clear effort to dismantle the stigma surrounding menstruation, using empowering language to challenge taboos and encourage open conversation. Educational posts aim to raise awareness on practical and urgent topics, like the dangers of toxic shock syndrome or the need for timely access to hygiene products, linking them to broader calls for policy change. Campaigns push for free products in public institutions and for the reduction of unfair taxation on menstrual items, framing these as essential services, not luxuries. Similarly to the previous example, the online following does not have high numbers, but the GKH's efforts in staying relevant and communicating its work are highly valuable. Its work focuses on compiling data, researching, and preparing policy papers that can and should be used in national strategies regarding menstrual health.

In 2024, the GKH prepared a final conference for the successful completion of their project Menstrualna pravda: Zajedno ka smanjenju menstrualnog siromaštva (Menstrual justice: together towards the reduction of menstrual poverty). This initiative was part of the public advocacy support program Pokret Polet, administered by the Trag Foundation with financial assistance from the European Union, in partnership with the Center for Social Policy and the Coalition for the Development of Solidarity Economy – KoRSE.

In the post-project documentation, the GKH provided a detailed account of the project activities alongside policy recommendations derived from the collected data. The research identified adolescent girls, aged between 12 and 18 years and living in poverty, as the group most vulnerable to menstrual poverty, due to the economic and structural limitations imposed by parents or guardians. These adolescents were found to have diminished agency over their bodies, limited access to sanitary spaces and bathrooms, and an increased likelihood of missing school during menstruation owing to a lack of menstrual products. Notably, the human rights framework adopted by the GKH stands out as a crucial element of their approach. An extensive literature review identified significant gaps within the Serbian legislative framework. The findings revealed that none of the four most pertinent laws (the Law on Social Protection, the Law on Public Health, the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, and the Law on Gender Equality) contains any explicit reference to menstrual health. Given that adolescent girls and women

of reproductive age comprise approximately 23.5% of Serbia's total population, this omission is deeply concerning, especially considering the substantial impact menstruation has on their physical, mental, and social wellbeing. As a corrective measure, the GKH proposed amending the Law on Public Health, specifically Article 7, to incorporate menstrual hygiene within the scope of public health protections, arguing that ensuring the availability and accessibility of menstrual products would directly enhance women's health outcomes and improve their overall quality of life.[36]

4. Conclusion

The "study of menstrual activism yields important insights into the evolution of social movements and feminist epistemology, a system of knowledges in constant flux."[37] Here, I provide a perspective on what digital activism can be and how it can be interpreted. While we have established concrete definitions through the methodological and theoretical conceptualization, it is essential to reconsider and question their limitations. Digital activism in the context of menstrual justice can manifest in various ways: sometimes it involves storytelling and community engagement, while at other times it focuses on informational outreach or institutional policy work. All three examples here utilize digital tools, but their orientation, target audience, and forms of activism differ significantly. Their presence on Instagram is not always intended to maximize engagement; rather, they function as digital pamphlets, public diaries, or repositories of knowledge. One nuance that should be considered is that not all digital engagement is activist in its intent or effect.

The similarities between these civil society actors include the use of knowledge production as resistance, they are working towards destigmatization and recognition of menstrual health, ensuring that the pain and real experience are not erased. They address stigma as structural violence, they engage with menstrual shame, as a form of systemic harm, through humor, workshops, and legal critique. Their contribution to everyday feminist discourse on menstrual justice might be low-engagement, and even quiet, but it is part of building new narratives that unveil the truth, reality, vulnerability, and pain that menstruation brings about.

36 Pavlović, J., 2024a, *Menstrualna pravda u Srbiji: Prepoznavanje potreba žena i adolescentkinja kroz javne politike* (Menstrual justice in Serbia: Recognizing the needs of women and adolescent girls through public policies), Novi Sad, Gender Knowledge Hub.

37 Bobel, C., 2010, *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, p. 7.

Notably, while these activists and civil society organizations engage with stigma, access, and bodily autonomy, the sustained discourse around intersectional identities is absent. Particularly, there is a lack of intersection of disability, gender diversity, and menstruation. This silence is not necessarily a reflection of individual oversight, but it is more indicative of the current cultural constraints within which civil society actors in Serbia operate.

This paper set out to examine the digital strategies of menstrual activists in Serbia, but what has emerged is a more nuanced understanding of what digital activism can be, and how feminist work is developing both online and offline. While I acknowledge that only one of the three examples fully embodies the traits of what is defined under the term digital activism, each of these examples contributes relevant work to the broader project of menstrual justice in Serbia and the Western Balkans.

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ZABORAVLJENE MENSTRUACIJE: ULOGA AKTIVIZMA U RAZOTKRIVANJU NEZNANJA

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APSTRAKT

Menstruacija je, usled globalnih kulturnih promena koje prevazilaze tišinu i tabu, postala češća tema u medijima. Prateći rad umetnica i aktivistkinja, rad osvetljava razvoj znanja o menstruaciji. Promovišući menstruaciju i menstrualno siromaštvo, aktivistkinje i NVO doprinele su promenama u školama i na univerzitetima u Srbiji i na Zapadnom Balkanu. Neke od ovih institucija danas obezbeđuju besplatne menstrualne proizvode. Rad istražuje ulogu digitalnih aktivistkinja i civilnog društva kao pokretača promena, sa fokusom na proizvodnji i deljenju znanja o telima menstruirajućih osoba. One popunjavaju praznine nastale nebrigom ili izostankom interesovanja javnog zdravstva. Ovaj članak se oslanja na zakonske izmene, doprinos civilnog sektora, kritičke menstrualne studije, digitalnu etnografiju i analizu sadržaja.

Ključne reči: digitalni aktivizam, menstrualni aktivizam, proizvodnja znanja, ljudska prava, javno zdravlje, Srbija, Zapadni Balkan.

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