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REFRAMING MENSTRUATION:
CULTURAL STIGMA, ECONOMIC EXCLUSION,
AND THE POLITICS OF THE BODY

Jasna Kovačević and Zilka Spahić-Šiljak
*The Price of Impure Blood: Cultural and Economic
Aspects of Menstruation in Bosnia and Herzegovina*,
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The book *The Price of Impure Blood: Cultural and Economic Aspects of Menstruation in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, by Jasna Kovačević and Zilka Spahić-Šiljak, offers a compelling and interdisciplinary examination of menstruation as a deeply embedded cultural, economic, and political issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Combining historical analysis, sociocultural critique, and empirical research, the authors move beyond surface-level discussions of menstrual health to expose the structural inequalities and cultural taboos that continue to shape women's experiences. The book's title, *The Price of Impure Blood*, effectively captures its core thesis: that menstruation, long constructed as biologically impure, imposes material, social, and psychological costs on women. This framing also raises important questions about the ways in which notions of bodily purity continue to organize access to citizenship, dignity, and full social participation. The authors' insistence that menstrual health must be understood not only as a personal issue but as a deeply political one represents a critical intervention into ongoing debates about bodily autonomy.

Structured into five interconnected chapters, the study moves from historical and symbolic understandings of menstruation to contemporary empirical findings, linking these insights to broader issues of gender, health, and social justice.

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In the introductory part of the book, the authors establish menstruation as a socially constructed phenomenon, historically framed by religious and cultural codes that associate menstrual blood with impurity and danger. The authors convincingly demonstrate that menstruation, traditionally associated with impurity and danger, has served as a site of broader social control over women's bodies. Rather than treating these constructions as relics of the past, the authors argue that the logic of impurity continues to inform modern perceptions and practices. This framing immediately signals the study's commitment to examining menstruation not merely as a biological fact but as a culturally loaded category that has justified exclusion, shame, and control.

Crucially, the authors highlight that menstrual poverty is not solely a function of economic hardship but reflects broader systemic inequalities. Their analysis situates menstrual health within the context of economic dependency, inadequate public health infrastructures, and persistent gender stereotypes. By doing so, they push against narrow understandings of menstrual health as an isolated "women's issue", arguing for its recognition as a matter of social justice and human rights. The notion that menstruation serves as a "boundary marker" between acceptable and unacceptable forms of femininity is a powerful insight.

Another significant strength of the book lies in its linking of cultural norms to healthcare practices. The authors describe how healthcare professionals often dismiss or minimize menstrual-related complaints, framing menstrual pain as a trivial or temporary inconvenience. This medical trivialization not only discourages women from seeking help but reflects deeper institutional misogyny within healthcare systems. Importantly, the book frames menstrual health as an indicator of systemic gender biases in healthcare provision, a point that could be fruitfully expanded through comparison with other countries in Europe.

The first substantive chapter deepens this historical contextualization, tracing how religious traditions, folk beliefs, and patriarchal norms have shaped enduring perceptions of menstrual blood as "unclean". The analysis demonstrates how these narratives became institutionalized across different domains of life, influencing gendered norms of bodily regulation. While this section is rich in historical detail, it leaves open space for a deeper engagement with feminist critiques of religious discourses and the mechanisms through which such symbolic orders are maintained in secular modernity.

Building on this foundation, the next chapter addresses menstrual poverty, conceptualizing it as a multidimensional issue encompassing economic precarity, infrastructural inadequacy, lack of education, and

persistent cultural stigma. The authors rightly situate menstrual poverty as a structural phenomenon rather than a personal hardship, demonstrating how limited access to hygiene products is symptomatic of broader inequalities. The authors show how the failure to incorporate comprehensive, destigmatizing menstrual education in schools perpetuates misinformation and reinforces cycles of shame. The recommendation to integrate menstruation into broader sexual and reproductive health curricula is a necessary one, but the analysis would be further strengthened by a discussion of political resistance to such reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly from conservative and religious actors. Economic instability, post-conflict fragmentation, and underfunded public services in the Western Balkans intersect to exacerbate menstrual inequities. Here, the analysis is both empirically grounded and theoretically robust, although a more systematic comparison between rural and urban settings, or among different ethnic groups within Bosnia and Herzegovina, could have enriched the discussion further.

The fourth chapter presents the core empirical findings of the study, based on surveys and interviews with women and girls. Using a mixed-methods approach, the authors document how economic precarity intersects with cultural stigma, limiting women's access to hygiene products and healthcare. The interviews and survey data vividly capture how young girls internalize shame from early childhood and how structural barriers prevent women from managing menstruation with dignity. The research reveals how stigma around menstruation is internalized through early socialization, manifesting in practices such as the use of euphemisms, feelings of embarrassment when purchasing hygiene products, and the normalization of silence about menstrual pain. This empirical material powerfully illustrates how bodily shame is not only imposed externally but also reinforced through intimate, everyday practices. However, the chapter remains largely focused on internalization and less attentive to potential sites of resistance, negotiation, and subversion – an area that would merit further exploration given the broader feminist scholarship on bodily autonomy.

In the fifth chapter, the authors shift their focus to the economic dimensions of menstruation, examining how financial instability impacts menstrual management and menstrual health. They show that the cost of menstrual products, relative to household income, presents a serious burden for many women, forcing some to resort to unhygienic alternatives. This final chapter of the book sets out a series of policy recommendations, including the subsidization of menstrual products, comprehensive menstrual education programs, and the integration of menstrual health into

national public health strategies. The authors insist that menstrual health must be recognized as a human rights issue, inherently tied to issues of dignity, equality, and social inclusion.

Throughout the book, the authors successfully avoid sensationalism, maintaining an academically rigorous tone while clearly conveying the urgency of menstrual justice. Their interdisciplinary approach – drawing on sociology, economics, public health, and gender studies – makes the book accessible to a wide range of audiences, including researchers, policymakers, activists, and students.

The Price of Impure Blood stands out as a critical contribution to the field, particularly in post-socialist and post-conflict contexts. By centering on Bosnia and Herzegovina, the authors challenge the Eurocentric bias that dominates much of the existing scholarship on menstruation and health, offering a nuanced account of how local histories, economies, and cultural norms shape embodied experiences.

In conclusion, Kovačević and Spahić-Šiljak offer a timely and necessary exploration of menstrual health as both a cultural and socio-economic issue. Their work not only documents the realities of menstrual stigma and poverty but also calls for a reconceptualization of menstruation as central issue in broader struggles for gender equality, human rights, and social justice. While future research might build upon their findings by engaging more deeply with questions of agency and political resistance, *The Price of Impure Blood* remains an essential text for anyone seeking to understand the entanglements of gender, health, and inequality in contemporary societies.

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