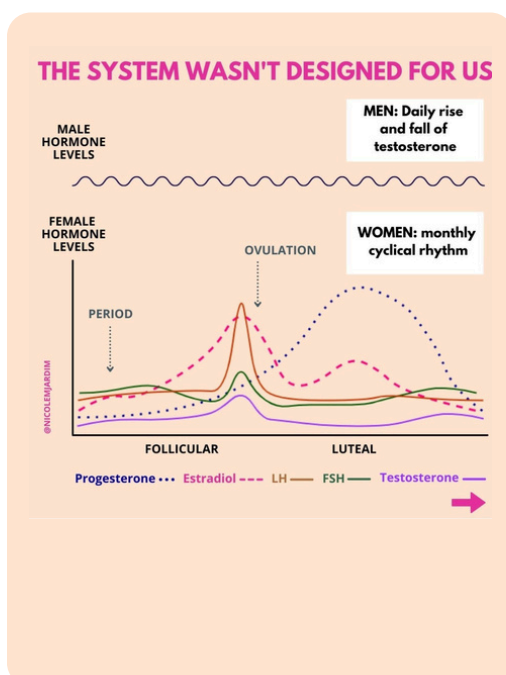




The silencing of women's innate power

By Julia Maria Angeli

In my early thirties I learnt a fundamental truth about my body. At that point in my life, I had been menstruating for approximately twenty years. Whilst period poverty is a very real issue in nearly all contexts, today I want to talk about shifting the shame, stigma and language around menstruating bodies. The conversation around menstrual health in industrialised or more 'westernised' countries has evolved at a rapid pace. As a white, European woman, I have had access to a rich collection of books, podcasts, programs and retreats, which are changing the narrative on what it means for women to experience their menstrual cycle in a conscious and embodied way. From all of this I have understood that harnessing your hormones can be a transformative experience for women and girls.



Did you know that men have a regular 24-hour cycle, with testosterone levels highest in the morning and diminishing in the evening? Conversely, women have a far more complex system which – for people who are menstruating – is governed by their menstrual cycle and does not fit neatly into rigid, patriarchal structures. Tracking my cycle and the hormone changes that accompany it has personally been a game changer and I am quietly outraged that this has not been taught in secondary schools. Since cycle tracking became a part of my life, I have increased my body literacy and I have become more grounded in myself. Bringing that knowledge into personal and professional spaces has meant that health and wellbeing has taken centre stage. I say this as someone who has had manageable periods for most of my life. For those who have intense pain, heavy bleeding, irregular and missing periods, hormone tracking and balancing has the potential to go so much further.



Perhaps more importantly, it has made me aware of the awesome cyclical power that is inherent in all women and girls. This cyclical power connects women across the globe – how we experience it or manage it, is completely different - but isn't it interesting that the uniting force between half the population, which cuts across cultures, ethnicities, social and economic class has been silenced? Systems of oppression have successfully managed to sideline this power and frame it as an (under researched) 'problem' that women should either just live with or be ashamed of.

This takes me to how women's health, including menstrual health, is being framed in low-income countries. In 2020, according to the World Health Organisation, a maternal death occurred almost every two minutes, mostly in low and lower middle-income countries. The sex-based health disparities extend to high prevalences of child marriage, female genital mutilations, cervical cancer and HIV/AIDS. Access to family planning, reproductive health services and menstrual hygiene products and information are often limited and of poor quality, particularly in remote and low resource settings. All of these issues are of critical importance and are often the difference between life and death. What is also true is that this is a deficit-driven narrative and framework to perceive and understand women's health. At no point during my 15-year career in international development and humanitarian response, have I heard practitioners discuss women's health and their bodies as a source of strength or as an asset that can be leveraged for agency and self-determination.

Two truths can co-exist at the same time. Providing life-saving health information and services is vital to women's continued empowerment and participation in social, cultural, political and economic life. That said, in this process, we are missing an important opportunity to raise awareness and knowledge around an intuitive and low-cost approach to women's health and wellbeing. Arguably, it is in the contexts where women are degraded for being on their period, or where myths and taboos are rife, where we should focus our efforts. It is in the contexts where girls describe learning of menses only when they experience bleeding for the first time. This lack of preparation leaves girls feeling especially vulnerable to feelings of shame. It is here that we need to inject a power-based narrative. Understanding how everything works biologically can begin to eradicate the shame that many of us are made to feel about normal and healthy bodily functions.

The menstrual cycle is a diagnostic tool for health and wellbeing. In 2015, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists recommended that the menstrual cycle be used as a fifth vital sign when evaluating the health of menstruating teenagers. It is an incredible feedback system, providing important information on our physical and emotional changes throughout the menstrual month; if only we would listen to it. It is a powerful inner guidance system and we should all be part of the growing community who are shifting the narrative on menstruation, which will help girls and women to feel pride and dignity in harnessing their cyclical nature.

