

On the Sensitivity of Sexual Taboo Topics: The Relevance of Parent-Child Dialogue on Menstruation in the Municipality of Dangbo (Republic of Benin), 2025

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ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional study aimed to assess the state of parent-child dialogue on menstruation in the municipality of Dangbo. Interviews were conducted with 115 adolescent female students aged 12 to 22 years and 29 parents. The findings revealed that some parents engage very little in discussions related to menstruation with their children, both prior to menarche and during menstruation. These results suggest the need to strengthen parents' capacities in menstrual management and to establish a periodic communication program to promote behavioral change among adolescent girls in Benin, encouraging them to engage in dialogue.

KEYWORDS: *communication, knowledge, hygiene, menstruation, sexuality, Dangbo.*

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INTRODUCTION

According to Johnston-Robledo and Stubbs (2013), menstruation is not merely a one-dimensional biological phenomenon concerning women's bodies and health, but a concept that intersects social, private, and public dimensions, influencing psychological and relational aspects. Menstruation remains a sensitive and taboo subject in many African societies, where cultural beliefs reinforce gender inequalities with negative impacts on girls' dignity, health, and education (Doumbia, 2018). It is

surrounded by taboos and supernatural perceptions (Kumar & Srivastara, 2011).

Many girls are not adequately prepared for this event. Mardon (2009) emphasizes that adherence to hygiene practices is essential from menarche (the first menstruation) to protect against infections, prevent interpersonal contamination, and maintain good health (Tidjani et al., 2013). However, a 2017 study revealed that girls in low- and middle-income

countries enter puberty with significant knowledge gaps and misconceptions about menstruation (Chandra-Mouli & Vipul Patel, 2017).

Menstrual hygiene management refers to the means and techniques employed by women to remain clean and healthy during the menstrual cycle (Doumbia, 2018). Yet, many girls receive little to no information about menstruation, making their first menstrual experience often frightening (Wilbur et al., 2019). Education on menstruation is necessary both at school and, more importantly, within the family. However, cultural taboos hinder effective menstrual management in both school and non-school settings (Bureau d'Ingénierie et de Services, 2017).

In Africa, and particularly in Benin, taboos and beliefs surrounding this biological phenomenon impose dietary restrictions on girls and limit their participation in daily social and educational activities during menstruation (Shah et al., 2019). Absenteeism due to menstruation has detrimental consequences on girls' academic performance and success. Given the intimate nature of menstruation, teachers believe that menstrual hygiene education should be primarily addressed within the family (UNESCO, 2014). This perspective led the Claudine Talon Foundation to implement a menstrual hygiene management project in schools across Benin, aiming to meet the needs of young girls and to encourage parent-child dialogue on menstruation (Fondation Claudine Talon, 2018).

Within families, the primary individuals authorized to provide information about menstruation are mothers and other female relatives, such as sisters, grandmothers, or friends (Mardon, 2011). Unfortunately, in both rural and urban communities, parents often do not discuss this event with their daughters, despite its inevitable occurrence in their lives. Some mothers find it difficult to talk to their children about issues related to menstruation (Shah et al., 2019), which is frequently regarded as a shameful bodily function or a source of natural impurity. Yet, the role of parents is to educate their daughters, particularly by preparing them for the onset of menstruation and guiding them in menstrual hygiene, with the support of society and schools.

Across all municipalities in Benin, including Dangbo, the issue of parent-child dialogue on sexual matters persists. Observations indicate that many parents often struggle to address sensitive and sexual topics with their children, even though they acknowledge this as part of their responsibilities. The problem of parental involvement remains during both the preparation and monitoring of the menstrual cycle. Educational norms further encourage parents- especially mothers- to prepare and support girls

through this event, owing to their shared physiological experience (Mardon, 2011).

This study is therefore guided by the following central research question: What is the current state of parent-child dialogue on girls' menstruation in the municipality of Dangbo?

Methodological Approach

1. Population and Sampling

This qualitative cross-sectional study was conducted in the municipality of Dangbo and aimed to collect non-numerical information, specifically the statements of respondents regarding the research topic. The target population consisted of 115 adolescent female students aged 12 to 22 years, enrolled in both lower and upper secondary school, as well as 29 parents of students.

The sample of adolescent female students was selected using a non-random method with an accidental sampling technique, whereby those present on the day of the survey were interviewed. The sample of parents was also selected using a non-random method, specifically the volunteer technique, including only those who consented to answer the questions.

To be included in the student sample, participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria: be regularly enrolled for the 2020-2021 academic year in one of the secondary schools in the municipality of Dangbo; be present on the day of the survey; have already experienced menstruation; be between 12 and 22 years of age; and provide informed written consent to participate in the study.

To be included in the parent sample, participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria: be a parent of a student attending one of the secondary schools in the municipality of Dangbo; have at least one adolescent daughter; volunteer to participate in the study; and provide informed written consent to participate.

2. Data Collection Tools and Techniques

Interviews with parents and adolescent students were conducted using two interview guides, each tailored to the respective target group. The data collected concerned parents' experiences of dialogue with their children about menstruation. The perceptions of the adolescent students were also gathered regarding communication with their parents on this sensitive and taboo subject. Based on a well-defined program, the interviews were conducted using a mobile phone (Tecno) equipped with a voice recorder, with the approval of the respondents. Data collection lasted five months, from March to July 2025, with the support of interviewers trained by specialists in

qualitative data management. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the defined targets until saturation was reached.

3. Data processus

After transcription, the interviews were analyzed based on the items contained in the interview guide, followed by thematic grouping to compare the responses obtained with the research hypothesis. Responses that were more or less similar were classified by area of interest. Through careful listening to the interview recordings, units of meaning were identified in order to provide substantive content to the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interviews.

Results

Interviews were conducted with respondents on the issue of parent-child communication regarding menstruation.

1. The Relevance of Parent-Child Dialogue on Menstruation

During adolescence, young girls experience various changes, among which the onset of menstruation is significant. In the course of our interviews, mothers defined menstruation in different ways. One of the adolescent respondents stated: *“Menstruation is dirty blood that comes out of a woman’s genitals for a period of time; the blood must come out, otherwise the girl does not feel comfortable.”* (E.A., Student, 15 years old; March 2025). In cases of absence or prolonged delay of menstruation, the adolescent girl wonders whether her health is affected or whether it is an anomaly. In this regard, one respondent declared: *“When a woman does not have her period, she becomes ill.”* (A.C., Mother of a student, 39 years old; June 2025). This perceived illness may be linked to concerns arising from delayed or absent menstruation.

Furthermore, respondents expressed views on the duration of menstrual flow, which typically ranges from three to seven days. Knowledge of this parameter varied among respondents. One mother affirmed: *“Periods occur monthly and must last at least five days. Periods of only two days are anomalies.”* (D.P., Mother of a student, 46 years old; June 2025). According to this mother, menstrual flow should last an average of five days for all women, with five days considered the minimum ideal duration.

Similarly, one father interviewed regarded the onset of menstruation as confirmation of a woman’s femininity and maturity. In this logic, one respondent declared: *“Menstruation is a phenomenon that makes a young girl accepted in society as a real woman.”*

(B.M., Father of a student, 40 years old; March 2025). This statement underscores the perception that menstruation marks a woman’s maturity and social recognition capable of assuming certain responsibilities that will be entrusted to her. For other respondents, menstruation is viewed as the source of procreation, as it provides women with the capacity to bear children. Without menstruation, a woman is not able to give life to a child. In this regard, one mother stated: *“If menstruation does not appear in a woman, she cannot have children.”* (T.O., Mother of a student, 33 years old; April 2025).

Some respondents considered menstruation to be inevitable. In this sense, its onset is perceived as a constraint for women. However, this phenomenon occurs independently of any woman’s will, and at some point, all women are confronted with this physiological reality. One student respondent affirmed: *“I know that having menstruation is an obligation for women; it is necessary.”* (F.P., Student, 19 years old; May 2025). Beyond being inevitable, this statement highlights the indispensable nature of menstruation.

Regarding the onset of the first menstruation among girls, some mothers believe that it should normally occur between the ages of 17 and 20.

In our time, girls had their periods at 17, 18, 19, or 20 years old, but today even girls under 12 have their periods. In reality, it is at 18 that a girl should have her period, and it is at that age that we should begin to talk to her.” (H.L., Mother of a student, 35 years old; April 2025).

According to this parent, discussions between parents and adolescent girls about menstruation should begin at the age of 18, since she considers this to be the age of menarche. In contrast, one father interviewed believed that such discussions should start before the onset of menstruation. This was confirmed in his statement: *“I explained to my daughters that at a certain age, they would have their periods.”* (K.L., Father of a student, 55 years old; July 2025).

Another mother continued in the same vein, saying: *“My daughter is 17, and already at 10 years old I was talking to her about menstruation because she saw it happening to her friends.”* (H.F., Mother of a student, 48 years old; July 2025). For this mother, parent-child discussions about menstruation should begin as early as age 10.

Among the students interviewed, one added that parents should begin discussions with adolescent girls as soon as the first signs of puberty appear: *“As soon as the breasts start to develop, parents should begin talking to girls and warning them about the changes*

they are going through.” (C.E., Student, 20 years old; April 2025).

Such parent–child dialogue could help prevent uncertainties and potentially misleading answers exchanged among peers.

2. From Psychological Preparation to the Practice of Menstrual Hygiene

Psychological preparation is important for children from the onset of adolescence, to inform them and prepare them to face the changes they will encounter during this period. Beyond psychological preparation, some believe that girls should also be frightened in order to keep them away from men: “Parents must begin by drawing girls’ attention to menstruation and sometimes scare them so that they do not approach men.” (C.Y., Mother of a student, 41 years old; May 2025). In this regard, it seems essential to draw adolescent girls’ attention to the behaviors and practices they should adopt during menstruation.

Hygienic practices for proper menstrual management were highlighted. It is therefore the responsibility of parents to advise girls, particularly adolescents, on these practices and behaviors. In this sense, one father interviewed stated: “A girl must wash herself in the morning and evening and wash the pads, otherwise she will smell.” (A.V., Father of a student, 35 years old; June 2025). This suggests that during menstruation, if a girl does not take care of her body and maintain proper hygiene, she may develop an unpleasant odor.

Moreover, the use of protective materials is among the first lessons a girl receives during menarche. In the interviews, one mother stated: “As soon as my daughter had her period, I taught her how to wear the pad (cloth).” (B.S., Mother of a student, 40 years old; July 2025). When a young girl menstruates, she must ensure proper protection so that blood does not leak. It is most often mothers who teach their daughters how to fold and place either disposable or washable sanitary pads in their underwear. One student shared the advice she receives from her mother: “During menstruation, my mother tells me to prepare my pad properly so that I do not get stained, and she advises me to put cotton on the absorbent fabric to protect myself well.” (F.O., Student, 13 years old; April 2025).

At the same time, some mothers believe that between commercial disposable sanitary pads and traditional cloth pads, the latter are cleaner and more hygienic. This perspective is reflected in the statement of one mother: “Disposable pads are not hygienic; it is the cloth that is hygienic and clean.” (G.D., Mother of a student, 52 years old; March 2025).

During adolescence, mothers’ primary concern for their daughters is that they do not become pregnant. Advice is often directed toward this objective, aiming to prevent young girls from engaging in sexual relations with men or, in some cases, to encourage them to avoid men altogether. One mother confided: “If you have your period and you approach a man, you will immediately become pregnant.” (T.L., Mother of a student, 37 years old; March 2025). For this mother, throughout the entire menstrual period, there is a possibility for a woman to become pregnant if she approaches a man.

Another mother supported this statement, affirming: “I also tell her not to give herself to men, because once she becomes pregnant, the man will deny responsibility for the pregnancy.” (D.E., Mother of a student, 44 years old; April 2025). The specific objective of mothers during this turbulent period is to prevent their daughters from becoming pregnant. Most advice is often oriented toward this aspect, and in addition, such advice is sometimes accompanied by misinformation, always with the intention of protecting girls from early or unwanted pregnancies. Unfortunately, other aspects related to menstruation—such as knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and practices concerning menstrual hygiene—are not always taken into account.

However, social representations and beliefs are associated with menstruation. In this regard, the majority of respondents stated that traditional sanitary cloths must be dried inside the bedroom to avoid falling victim to witchcraft by someone with malicious intent who might gain possession of the material. This was expressed by one student respondent, who affirmed: “She must dry the pad in the bedroom; otherwise, outside, a malicious person could take a thread from the traditional sanitary cloth to cast a spell so that she cannot have children.” (H.A., Student, 17 years old; April 2025).

Parent–child discussions about menstruation should therefore be held regularly to break the restrictions and taboos surrounding this subject.

Discussion

1. Parent–Child Dialogue on Menstruation: The Importance of Breaking the Barriers of This Taboo Subject

Discussions or dialogues about menstruation are often rare in certain communities, including the area covered by this study. The findings of our research revealed that more than half of the adolescent students surveyed did not receive advice on menstruation from their parents. Consequently, not all of them were adequately prepared before menarche. Results from studies conducted in 2018 and 2019

confirm our findings, showing that the absence of family dialogue on menstruation was a major factor behind the lack of preparation for menarche among many Ethiopian and Gambian adolescents (Shah et al., 2019). Continuous parental communication on this subject with adolescent girls is therefore crucial for better management of menstruation.

However, in certain societies, parents view this period as the appropriate time to arrange marriage for their daughters and sometimes avoid discussing it with them. Shah et al. (2019) revealed that in Gambia, mothers experience difficulties in discussing issues related to menstruation with their children. Their findings also showed that, despite this barrier between parents, many mothers believe that their daughters should acquire some knowledge about menstruation before menarche.

Following studies conducted in Kenya and Ethiopia, Jewitt and Ryley (2014) reported that the problem of communication about menstruation stems from a lack of accurate and credible information, as well as a lack of confidence among mothers. Evidence of this was found among respondents in the municipality of Dangbo, both students and parents, who stated that menstrual periods lasting two to three days are anomalies. Yet, according to UNICEF (2017), menstrual flow typically lasts an average of three to seven days each month. Proper management of menstrual hygiene is essential for girls during this period, as it contributes to their well-being.

Consequently, family discussions—whether within the nuclear or extended family—about menstruation should not be considered taboo. Such dialogue would enable adolescent girls to regard menstruation as a natural phenomenon (Izugbara, 2007), while ensuring they receive adequate information prior to menarche.

2. From Psychological Preparation to the Practice of Menstrual Hygiene

The majority of adolescent girls surveyed, similar to those in a study involving participants aged 10 to 19, enter puberty without preparation due to a lack of adequate information (Dasgupta & Sarkar, 2008). The absence of discussions about menstruation at home between parents and their children means that many girls reach menarche without any preparation (Wall et al., 2018). Older women in communities such as Dangbo in the Republic of Benin, most of whom are illiterate, often recount biologically inaccurate myths about menstruation and even reinforce them (Crofts, 2015). Stigmas associated with menstruation further reinforce discriminatory behaviors against women in their interactions with men, particularly in professional settings, due to gender representation in these spaces (Bœuf, 2020).

To facilitate these interactions, it is urgent to correct inaccurate judgments about women during menstruation. A study conducted in 2018 demonstrated that education through Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) techniques could shed light on the misconceptions surrounding menstruation (Rajanbir et al., 2018). Strategies to improve knowledge about menstruation among adolescents and adults in communities are urgently needed to combat the stigmatization associated with it (Shah et al., 2019).

Menstruation has often tended to be perceived as dangerous within cultural contexts. Restrictions imposed on women during menstruation are more prevalent in rural areas than in urban settings. Yet, it is evident that educating both men and women about menstruation would help dismantle false beliefs and taboos surrounding this biological process. It is important to note that girls' perspectives on menstruation influence their hygiene practices during menstrual bleeding (Lawan et al., 2010).

A study conducted in 2014 revealed that inadequate preparation before menarche leaves girls with negative feelings toward menstruation, such as fear, confusion, and low self-esteem (Tegegne & Sisay, 2014). Moreover, unhygienic menstrual practices can affect girls' health (Upashe et al., 2015). Poor menstrual hygiene practices may also lead to genitourinary tract infections, cervical cancer, school absenteeism or dropout, poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and reduced quality of life (Tegegne & Sisay, 2014).

When girls face difficulties in obtaining sanitary pads to prevent staining their clothes and being teased or humiliated by classmates, their classroom participation and psychological well-being are negatively affected (Tegegne & Sisay, 2014). Other studies conducted in 2014 and 2011, respectively in Ethiopia (Tegegne & Sisay, 2014) and India (Thakre et al., 2011), found that girls were unable to use sanitary pads due to lack of awareness, restrictions imposed by mothers, or disposal problems. In this regard, the use of sanitary pads and the washing of the genital area are essential practices for maintaining sustainable menstrual hygiene (Upashe et al., 2015).

For some girls, the choice of absorbent material is generally linked to personal preferences. This was observed in a 2017 study among girls in India (Mathiyalagen et al., 2017). A study conducted in Nigeria revealed that 31% and 56% of schoolgirls surveyed used toilet paper or cloth to absorb menstrual blood instead of disposable sanitary pads (Aniebue et al., 2009). In Gambia, the cultural belief that blood-stained material can be used to cast curses

may be one of the significant reasons why women prefer cloth to disposable sanitary pads (Shah et al., 2019).

However, it is urgent to draw upon the strategies implemented by women during menstruation to better manage menstrual hygiene. Appropriate water, sanitation, and hygiene services are necessary for effective menstrual hygiene management (Wilbur et al., 2019). Women must have broad access to information, hygienic absorbent materials, water, adequate sanitary facilities that ensure privacy, positive social norms, and appropriate policies established to support better menstrual management (Miuro et al., 2018).

Women and girls of reproductive age must adopt good practices related to menstrual hygiene. It is also important that they have strong access to clean hygienic absorbent products, which would guarantee them good health and thereby reduce, within their population, the incidence of reproductive tract infections.

Conclusion

This research has provided a diagnostic of parent-child dialogue on menstruation among adolescent students in the municipality of Dangbo. The investigation revealed that discussions with adolescents about sexuality, particularly menstruation, are often limited. These findings confirm the hypothesis that the absence of parent-child dialogue before and after the onset of menarche reinforces poor menstrual practices. Further studies involving all adolescent girls in the municipality of Dangbo and across Benin are necessary for external validation of these results.

This research also explored the levels of knowledge and practices related to menstrual management observed among respondents. It should serve as a resource for administrative, educational, and health authorities in the implementation of strategies aimed at strengthening the capacities of immediate stakeholders in knowledge and practices related to menstrual management. Among these strategies, a periodic communication program for behavior change targeting students should be considered.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

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