

**BEYOND REPRODUCTION: MENSTRUATION AND GENDER ROLES IN
HUNGARIAN TEXTBOOKS**

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation inequality represents a significant human rights challenge perpetuated by a lack of education and stigmatization. This thesis examines how Hungarian public school textbooks address menstruation and the extent to which they contribute to ongoing stigmas and reinforce traditional gender roles. By employing thematic content analysis on biology textbooks aligned with the National Curricula of 2020, this study unveils a notable lack of comprehensive menstrual education. The analysis reveals that these textbooks primarily emphasize the reproductive function of menstruation while neglecting broader aspects of menstrual health and failing to address common misconceptions and stigmas. The content reinforces traditional gender norms by presenting menstruation mainly in the context of reproduction and female roles as child-bearers. This study argues that such educational materials perpetuate menstruation and gender inequality, reflecting broader sociopolitical influences in Hungary. The findings underscore the need for inclusive and holistic menstrual education to dismantle stigmatization and promote menstrual health.

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INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is a fundamental experience for about half of the population, while the other half is closely surrounded by menstruators at different stages of their lives. Despite its universality, menstruation remains a taboo subject, with many individuals feeling compelled to hide any signs of their menstrual cycle. Young teenagers often learn about menstruation only after they experience their menarche, leading to a culture of secrecy and euphemism. Menstruators frequently hide menstrual products and view their cycles as negative experiences to be endured privately. The idealized images of running in white pants or lying in flowery fields do not reflect the real experiences of most menstruators.

Menstruation is a human rights issue because it intersects with fundamental rights such as health, education, work, culture, and participation in public life. Addressing menstrual stigma and ensuring access to menstrual products and facilities are essential for upholding the rights of all who menstruate, promoting equality, and fulfilling state obligations to realize human rights for all citizens. According to the World Bank, about 500 million people worldwide lack access to basic menstrual products and hygienic facilities during their menstrual cycles (World Bank 2022). This lack of affordability and accessibility, combined with cultural stigma and societal factors, constitutes menstruation inequality.

One might assume that people in European Union member states can better afford period products; however, these countries also face menstruation inequality on multiple levels. Menstruation inequality has a significant impact on individuals in Hungary as well. While many aspects of menstruation inequality can be observed worldwide, it is crucial to understand the specific factors contributing to this phenomenon in Hungary. The sociopolitical landscape plays a significant role in perpetuating stigma and period inequality in the country. Menstrual inequality affects not only marginalized individuals but all menstruators, regardless of their

financial situation. Therefore, investigating this issue within the Hungarian context is both relevant and necessary.

This thesis aims to better understand how menstruation inequality is present in Hungary, with a specific focus on the educational materials related to this challenge. I am motivated to conduct this study due to the strong family and gender politics currently influencing Hungary. Education plays a critical role in shaping societal attitudes; thus, examining the menstrual content in Hungarian public school textbooks is essential. In Hungary, school textbooks are governed by a state-imposed national curriculum, indicating significant potential state control over educational content. This level of control, coupled with policies that strongly encourage childbirth, fits within the broader theoretical framework of Foucauldian biopower, which I employ in this study. I draw on theories from scholars such as Emily Martin, Chris Bobel, Chella Quint, Marni Sommer, Bianca Blackmore, and Inga Winkler to investigate how menstruation stigmatization and gender roles might be perpetuated through educational materials.

The primary aim of this paper is to examine the extent to which menstruation-related content is covered in Hungarian public school textbooks and to explore how these materials may perpetuate stigmatization around menstruation and portray gender roles.

The key research questions guiding this study are:

- To what extent is menstruation covered in Hungarian textbooks?
- Does the content related to menstruation in these textbooks contribute to menstruation's stigmatization and portrayal of gender roles, and if so, in what ways?

My analysis reveals that the coverage of menstruation-related content in Hungarian school textbooks is minimal and predominantly focuses on the reproductive aspects of menstruation.

Three main themes emerged from the analysis: 1) lack of information on the entire menstrual cycle, 2) reproductive organ systems, and emphasis on 3) contraception and conception. A detailed examination of these themes indicates that the content found in textbooks contributes to the further stigmatization of menstruation and fails to educate students in a manner that would challenge negative social perceptions of the menstrual cycle. Additionally, textbooks further reinforce traditional gender roles, emphasizing women's reproductive functions and role as primary caretakers of families.

This study employs thematic content analysis for examining textbooks, utilizing Clarke and Braun's approach to thematic analysis. This method, which can be applied in various ways, combines inductive and deductive methods to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the dataset. This approach was chosen as it best advanced the understanding of the menstrual content in Hungarian school textbooks and how it contributes to menstruation inequality.

MENSTRUATION INEQUALITY AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS IN HUNGARIAN GENDER POLITICS

1. Menstruation Inequality: Stigmatization and Education

1.1 Menstruation is Fundamental

Menstruation is a phenomenon that is not discussed openly enough in the public or private sphere. There are many components to the cycle other than monthly bleeding. Menstrual health encompasses “information about the menstrual cycle and self-care; materials, facilities, and services to care for the body during menstruation; diagnosis, care, and treatment for menstrual discomforts and disorders; a positive and respectful environment which minimizes psychological distress; and freedom to participate in all spheres of life.” (Hennegan et al. 2021, p. 3). All elements of menstrual health should be fulfilled to ensure a healthy experience of one’s menstrual cycle. When these elements are not ensured, menstruation inequality arises, a global issue outlined by Critical Menstruation Studies (Bobel et al. 2020).

Many scholars, activists, and politicians use the term “menstruation poverty” to refer to this global challenge (Carneiro 2021; Erdey and Várnagy 2022; Jaafar, Ismail, and Azzeri 2023; Kunhalmi, Gurmai, and Bangóné Borbély 2019; Rutai 2020). I find “menstrual inequality” a better-fitting term as it encompasses broader issues behind this phenomenon. While, menstruation poverty emphasizes financial constraints and lack of menstrual hygiene education (Carneiro 2021, p. 1), menstruation inequality encompasses a broader spectrum of structural, cultural, economic, and political factors that marginalize menstruators. It addresses the lack of education, societal stigmas, taboos, and inadequate hygiene facilities while also considering financial restraints. Inga Winkler highlights menstruation as fundamental (Winkler 2020, p. 9),

connecting menstruation to political, public, personal, intimate, psychological, and socio-cultural aspects. This fundamentality is also captured by power relations and dynamics (Winkler 2020, p. 12), which I will explain in detail through the theory of biopower in “Gender Politics and Policies” chapter. Menstruation inequality, unlike menstruation poverty, considers systematic and political factors and acknowledges societal stigmas and cultural taboos, which are also at play in the creation of textbooks. Thus, this broader definition better suits my research on analyzing public school textbooks.

1.2 Stigmatization of Menstruation

Many menstruators experience stigmatization both externally and internally. Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan C. Chrisler delve into this concept of stigmatization surrounding menstruation, arguing that menstruation is a significant source of social stigma for women (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013, p. 9). Drawing on Erving Goffman's definition (Goffman 1963), stigma is seen as a stain or mark that portrays an individual's body or character as defective, differentiating and devaluing them (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013, p.9). This stigma is sustained through sociocultural mechanisms such as advertisements, euphemisms, and educational materials, all of which convey negative messages about the menstrual cycle, particularly focusing on bleeding and menstrual blood.

One of the most common themes in messages around menstruation is secrecy and concealment. Advertisements of menstrual products often depict women in unrealistic images, on their period, as cheerful in a flowery environment wearing white pants (Jackson and Falmagne 2013; Merskin 1999). Blue-colored liquids have been used to illustrate the absorbency of period products instead of actual blood. These idealized images create a narrative, encouraging secrecy and hushing about menstrual bleeding and other physical and emotional elements of the menstrual cycle (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013, p. 11).

Maureen C. McHugh describes this as the “concealment imperative,” confining menstruating people to the “menstrual closet” (McHugh 2020, p. 413). Society imposes the idea that bleeding is dirty and flawed, leading to practices like hiding menstrual products and using euphemistic language (“Red Army”; Mother Nature is here”) to discuss menstruation. Such practices reinforce the taboo and stigmatization surrounding menstruation (McHugh 2020, p. 412).

Besides advertisements and euphemisms, educational materials often convey a negative narrative of menstruation. Erchull’s study on American educational booklets from 1932 to 1997 found a focus on negative aspects, such as irritability, PMS, and cramps, perpetuating a negative portrayal of menstruation (Erchull et al. 2002). Ghanoui’s study on 1950s American menstrual educational films also underlined how these films perpetuated stigma (Ghanoui 2020). Furthermore, Stubb and Sterling found that menstrual education contents often fail to recognize menstruation as a vital sign of general health, lacking holistic education on menstrual health (Stubbs and Sterling 2020, p. 229).

Educational materials can reinforce stigma, but effective and comprehensive menstrual education can counteract it. Rather than traditional lectures or textbooks, interactive educational interventions have been shown to increase students' menstrual knowledge and skills while normalizing menstruation as a discussion topic (Evans et al. 2022). Thus, a well-curated curriculum and effective delivery methods can help dissolve stigmatization.

Societal stigma has significant consequences for menstruators’ well-being and health. It creates self-consciousness and internalized shame, leading to negative self-perception and lowered self-esteem (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013, p. 11). Common self-monitoring practices, such as checking for leaks, hiding menstrual products, and canceling plans due to fear of spotting, create additional emotional and physical stress (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013, p. 13). Young argues that this societal shame can serve as a tool to oppress women, reinforcing

the notion that menstruation is undesirable and flawed (Young 2005). This oppression is particularly present in work and school environments, which are often designed around male bodies, contributing to the othering of women and reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

1.3 Education as a Remedy for Stigmatization

Building on the challenges of menstruation inequality and stigmatization, my study focuses on education as a solution. Chris Bobel argues that education is crucial for shifting negative societal perceptions, challenging stigmas, and educating people about their bodies (Bobel 2019, p. 285). She argues that menstruation inequality is rooted in systematic sexism that portrays menstruating bodies in a negative light. Education should empower girls to establish agency over their bodies, make informed decisions, and challenge cultural norms (Bobel 2019, p. 285). Education must be inclusive, teaching everyone about the menstrual cycle and its sociocultural aspects. Without this, menstruation will continue to be seen as a private problem, burdening menstruators solely (Bobel 2019, p. 297).

Textbooks play a crucial role in education as primary sources of information, shaping the narratives transmitted to students. A study by Abha Maurya and Madhu Kushwaha on Indian textbooks highlights this importance. Textbooks reflect socio-cultural gender norms, stereotypes about menstruation, and canonized beliefs (Maurya and Kushwaha 2017). They are often designed by individuals constrained by political and economic factors, mirroring dominant political agendas and reinforcing cultural narratives. Therefore, textbooks inform students and reflect broader societal dynamics, including politics and gender norms. This underscores the focus of my study, as textbooks provide insights into both the material taught and the contextual factors shaping education.

I will analyze Hungarian textbooks using existing curricula and guidelines as benchmarks. Chella Quint's comprehensive guide for menstrual education in the UK (Quint 2022), offers main key takeaways that can be adapted outside of the UK. Quint adopts an intersectional approach, including both menstruators and non-menstruators, dismantling stigma and shame, covering the entire menstrual cycle, period products, and other menstruation-related issues. Two other Australian studies will also further my research (Blackmore, Moran, and Wigginton 2024; Curry et al. 2023). These studies underscore the importance of comprehensive menstrual education beyond reproduction, noting that lack of information can lead students to rely on misinformation circulating in society. Additionally, exclusively embedding menstruation within the reproductive curricula creates heterosexist conceptions of sexuality and reinforces traditional gender norms (Diorio and Munro 2000).

2. Gender Politics and Menstruation Inequality in Viktor Orbán's Hungary

2.1 Political Context in Hungary

Since 2010, Hungary's political landscape has been dominated by the Fidesz party. The party is led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has been in office for four consecutive terms. Since the 2010 elections, Fidesz has occupied more than two-thirds of the National Assembly, and since 2022, holding all ministries, leaving little room for opposition parties. Despite the efforts of the opposition parties, they have not been able to challenge the current government.

Orbán's government has been facing criticism from the European Union regarding Hungary's democratic backsliding, erosion of freedom of speech and press, human rights concerns affecting women, minority groups, refugees, and LGBTQ people, and corruption allegations due to the lack of transparency and accountability of the government. The EU and countries

like Belgium, Sweden, Germany, and France see Orbán's government as a threat to democracy, human rights, and the principles and values of the EU (Serhan 2022). In 2023, the EU withheld funds from Hungary due to judicial independence violations; however, this sanction was lifted in early 2024 (Krivade 2024).

It is worth mentioning the political environment of Hungary to better understand the political context in which gender policies are made, influencing the portrayal of gender roles and menstruation in the country.

2.2 Gender Politics and Policies

The political discourse of Orbán often revolves around national identity and population that is perceived to be threatened by several factors, such as a demographic crisis, migration, progressive stances on gender, and the demand for LGBTQ+ rights. The stated aims of Orbán have been to improve the Hungarian labour force to overcome the country's economic instability and to ensure Hungarian hegemony in the country in contrast to accepting migrants and refugees into the country (Sata 2021). To achieve these aims, Orbán started instrumentalizing women through their capacity for childbearing.

This practice of instrumentalization can be explained by the theory of biopower, which originates from Michael Foucault. Foucault describes biopower as a mechanism used by powerful authorities, like states, to regulate and control the bodies of a population (Foucault 1978). This mechanism is used to achieve a certain goal by regulating bodies. As Foucault describes it, "to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order." (Foucault 1978). For example, a state might use biopower to increase its population by controlling sexuality and fertility, incentivizing childbirth, limiting the termination of pregnancies, promoting traditional family values, and managing reproductive health conditions. These practices interfere with

people's reproductive freedom, instrumentalizing women's capacity to bear children and achieve population growth.

Building upon the theory of biopower, it is important to see how Orbán's government has been using this power in practice. The government's main aim has been to address demographic concerns, which could be improved by solutions that instrumentalize women's capacity for childbearing. Orbán has highlighted the special role of women in achieving population growth by emphasizing their responsibilities as child-bearers and family caretakers. Orbán declared his desire for a 'comprehensive deal' with women in 2018, in which the government compensates an increasing number of children with extra-governmental funds (Sata 2021, p. 37). The "baby grant" provides substantial financial help to families with three or more children, this way making child rearing an attractive choice for couples. The attractiveness originates from financial benefits such as a grant of 10 million forints, equivalent to approximately five years of minimum wage, tax incentives, subsidized mortgages, house-renovation projects, and family-sized cars (Fodor 2024).

Additionally, women under the age of 30 can cancel their university loans when they have a child within two years after graduation (Csalad.hu 2024). While women can have three years of fully paid maternity leave, fathers receive only 5-7 days of parental leave (Fodor 2024; Magyar Államkincstár 2023). These policies suggest that women are preferred in child-rearing roles, limiting their participation in other spheres of life.

Furthermore, Fidesz's agenda on women's retirement also reflects traditional gender roles for women as primary caretakers. Orbán once said, "Women can now retire after 40 years of registered employment.... they obviously deserve it, is also an opportunity for them to spend

more time with their families, and especially with their children and grandchildren. And so I think that this enables an important opportunity to strengthen family ties.” (Sata 2021)¹.

As Robert Sata argued, such policies and rhetoric reinforce traditional family values and gender stereotypes, which eventually limit women’s opportunities outside of the domestic sphere. Sata found that Orbán has been using Christianity to frame such family-oriented roles for women within the family and in society, portraying these roles as complementary to men's rather than advocating for genuine gender equality (Sata 2021, p. 47).

The above-mentioned measures of Fidesz regarding women’s rights and benefits do not, in fact, support gender equality, nor do they improve women’s rights in the country. This can also be seen as Fidesz only supports women who choose to be mothers; meanwhile, the government has been cutting funds for women’s organizations and agencies and dismantling their operations by also naming them as foreign agents of the West (Roggeband and Krizsán 2018). Another political decision signaling that the government does not actually support women’s rights is that it refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention based on the convention’s supposed gender and migration politics (Roggeband and Krizsán 2018). The Istanbul Convention is an important step in combating gender-based violence on an international level; by not ratifying this convention, the government is making a clear decision not to target the issue of gender-based violence in Hungary (Roggeband and Krizsán 2018).

The broader discussion on gender politics is important when focusing on menstrual education to contextualize the attitudes and opinions reflected in the educational materials. In my study, I seek to examine whether traditional gender roles are reflected in textbooks’ content related to

¹ The original speech in English is no longer available on the indicated website.

menstruation and if they offer insight into underlying attitudes and motivations behind educational curricula.

2.3 Menstruation Inequality in Hungary

In Hungary, there has been very little academic research done on menstruation inequality from a sociopolitical perspective. The only existing data that can be found were collected by civil society organizations and activists who are engaged in this topic. Such entities highlighted the inadequacies of national data collection while adding that non-governmental organizations do not receive enough funds to carry out extensive research in the Hungarian context (Erdey and Várnagy 2022). Even though there is an inadequate academic sphere, news outlets, blogs, and civic projects are increasingly focusing on the issue (Krajnyik 2021; Magyar Vöröskereszt 2018; Szöllősi 2024; Tampont 2022). The only relatively extensive data collection was carried out by the Hungarian Red Cross and Procter and Gamble, who collected and evaluated a survey of 300 online participants, as cited by Erdey and Várnagy (Erdey and Várnagy 2022, p. 68). The study concluded that approximately every 5th girl in school faces period poverty. However, it is important to recognize the limitations of this dataset, which only included 300 online participants, before drawing conclusions. Such a limited and random sample may not be statistically stable or representative of the broader population in Hungary.

Even though there is a lack of research, there are visible signs of the menstrual health challenge. For example, the financial challenges aggravate the situation as there is a 27% value-added tax (VAT) on menstrual hygiene products; this way, Hungary has the highest VAT charged for such products in Europe. This poses a significant financial burden for Hungarians, especially considering the country's low minimal income compared to other countries like Sweden and Denmark, which levy the second and third highest VAT on period products in Europe. In 2022, the European Union modified a previous directive, Annex III of Directive 2006/112/EC, and

allowed “pharmaceutical products used for medical and veterinary purposes, including products used for contraception and female sanitary protection, and absorbent hygiene products” to be zero rated (Directive 2022/542/EC.). However, Hungary still has not decreased its high VAT on period products.

Despite attempts to address the financial burdens through policy proposals by MSZP party members of Parliament in July 2019 (Kunhalmi, Gurmai, and Bangóné Borbély 2019), the proposal was declined by the Economic Committee of the Parliament (Rutai 2020). The proposal aimed to reduce the VAT on menstrual products and ensure access to these products for impoverished women and girls (Kunhalmi, Gurmai, and Bangóné Borbély 2019). However, there has been no consideration to reduce the VAT on menstrual products or support women living in poverty, thus disregarding the challenges of people who cannot afford the products.

There has been one policy implementation in recent years regarding menstrual leave policies. In Budapest, two districts’ municipalities (VI and VII districts) have allowed one day of menstrual leave for those who experience strong cramps. This leave can be utilized when the employee can provide a doctor’s notice. This policy may be a symbolic step in promoting good menstrual health; however, this policy only applies to those employed by municipally owned companies (Erdey and Várnagy 2022). Moreover, there has been no report on the policy’s effectiveness or impact on menstruating people in these districts.

Other than financial constraints, menstruation inequality is composed of the lack of education and the stigmatization of the topic in general. There has been research studying the attitude of women and men towards menstruation in Hungary (Nyitrai and Takács 2019b) , and another study focuses on the attitude of mothers and daughters regarding menstruation (Nyitrai and

Takács 2019a). These studies cover some elements of stigmatization and social narrative; however, they lack further in-depth information on the underlying structures and materials that perpetuate the negative attitudes toward menstruation. For this reason, my research adds to this study by closely analyzing educational materials that may regarding their menstruation content and observe whether and how they contribute to perpetuating societal stigmas around menstruation.

METHODS OF THE CASE STUDY

The primary aim of this study is to analyze the extent to which menstruation-related content is present in Hungarian textbooks under the National Curricula 2020 and examine further how the menstruation-related content perpetuates stigmas about menstruation and portrays gender roles.

The data for this study was collected from the official website of the National Institute of Public Education (OH)² where the latest National Core Curricula (NAT)³ 2020 can be found. The NAT is an official document created by the Ministry of Education as a branch of the Ministry of Human Resources. The NAT describes the curriculum for primary and secondary education, including subjects, educational materials, and hours spent on each theme (Benziger 2017). Each subject has its own “kerettanterv” (framework curriculum) for elementary and high school separately. After looking through each subject in both levels of education, I found that only biology curricula cover menstruation as a theme and only in the high school curriculum (grades 9-12).

The NAT determines a list of textbooks from which teachers can choose. It is published on the website of OH, from where I downloaded it.⁴ The list is created by the Institute for Educational Research and Development, defining two textbooks per grade per subject that teachers can choose from. I downloaded all biology textbooks from grades 1 to 12 and searched for the keywords “menstruáció” (menstruation), “ciklus” (cycle), “ovuláció” (ovulation), “menzesz” (period), “menstruációs vérzés” (menstrual bleeding). The textbooks that had content related to menstruation were downloaded and analyzed, and textbooks that did not have any results for

² Oktatási Hivatal. https://www.oktatas.hu/koznevelas/kerettantervek/2020_nat

³ Nemzeti Alaptanterv

⁴ <https://www.tankonyvkatalogus.hu/>

the keywords were excluded from the study. The following books are in my study, and they will be cited based on their textbook code (e.g.78TA):

Option A – written by Baranyai József, Veres Gábor, Kerényi Zoltán

OH-BIO78TA: Biológia tankönyv az általános iskolák számára 7-8 (Biology textbook for 7th-8th grade students in primary schools)

OH-BIO78MA: Biológia munkafüzet az általános iskolák számára 7-8. (Biology workbook for 7th-8th grade students in primary schools)

OH-BIO910TA-II: Biológia tankönyv 9-10. II. Kötet (Biology textbook for 9th-10th grade students, Volume II)

Option B – written by dr. Szerényi Gábor

OH-BIO78TB: Biológia tankönyv az általános iskolák számára 7-8 (Biology textbook for 7th-8th grade students in primary schools)

OH-BIO910TB-II: Biológia tankönyv 9-10. II. Kötet (Biology workbook for 7th-8th grade students in primary schools)

For A-level education/ electives:

OH-BIO1112E: Gyűjtemény a BIOLÓGIA emelt szintű oktatásához 11-12. (Collection for advanced BIOLOGY education 11-12.)

Veres Gábor, Szabó Bence Farkas, Baranyai József, Kerényi Zoltán

OH-BIO910E: Gyűjtemény a BIOLÓGIA emelt szintű oktatásához (Collection for advanced BIOLOGY education)

Baranyai József, Bán Sándor, Veres Gábor

Teachers have 13 biology textbooks to choose from, between grades 7-12, and seven of these cover menstruation. This list of seven textbooks indicates that from grades 7-10, menstruation is taught as a topic to everyone in biology class, while in higher grades (10-12), biology can be chosen as an elective where menstruation is also covered. Students are around the age of 12-13 in grade 7 when they first learn about the menstrual cycle.

Thematic analysis was used as a method to analyze the textbooks. The method of my study is based on Clarke and Braun's thematic analysis, which is a tool that can be used in various ways (Clarke and Braun 2017). I considered using a mix of inductive and deductive analysis the most fitting as this advanced the understanding of my dataset the most. As the first step, I inductively identified themes and topics in the educational materials. These included topics like the menstrual cycle, ovulation, menstrual bleeding, and reproduction. Throughout the readings, I focused not only on the texts but also on the connotations of words, exercises, and visual cues such as pictures and graphs.

As the second step, I deductively identified further topics after re-reading the materials. Existing literature on menstrual education and theories on menstrual studies advanced my coding set (Blackmore, Moran, and Wigginton 2024; Bobel 2019; Bobel et al. 2020; Curry et al. 2023; Diorio and Munro 2000; Erchull et al. 2002; Maurya and Kushwaha 2017; Sommer et al. 2020; Young 2005). Moreover, I created guiding questions when reading the textbooks. Some of the questions were adapted from the study by Blackmore, Moran, and Wigginton on analyzing Australian menstrual education content (Blackmore, Moran, and Wigginton 2024). Some examples of my questions are: how is menstruation described; what is the content focusing on; what is it not focusing on; what assumptions about menstruation are clear; and

how are women portrayed? After looking through the textbooks a second time with guiding questions, I added new themes to the code book and, in the end, finalized the themes and identified major topics and themes that kept appearing in the textbooks.

ANALYSIS OF THE CASE STUDY: MENSTRUATION REPRESENTATION AND GENDER ROLES IN HUNGARIAN TEXTBOOKS

Seven Biology textbooks included content on menstruation, and these textbooks were from grades 7-12. This means that students learn about menstruation for the first time at around age 12-13 and could receive further education on it until they are 18. However, mandatory biology education only lasts until grade 10, meaning that the content taught in the latter grades is taught in electives. One of the textbooks mentioned that girls in Hungary, on average, have their menarche around the age of 12-13 (grade 6-7); however, the biology curriculum on the primary level (grade 7-8) does not mention education on the menstrual cycle. This allows teachers not to educate students on menstruation as the curriculum does not require them to do so. Since there is no institutional requirement to educate students before their menarche, it contradicts the suggestions that advocate for educating students before their first period (Chandra-Mouli and Patel 2017).

To answer the first part of the research question, to what extent menstruation-related content is present in the textbooks, I found that the coverage is limited. The content provided is insufficient for educating students on the entire menstrual cycle, making menstruators understand their bodily functions, as well as informing non-menstruators adequately. My findings were drawn from previous literature (Blackmore, Moran, and Wigginton 2024; Bobel 2019; Curry et al. 2023; Martin 1988; Quint 2022).

Throughout the analysis I found topics that were reoccurring as the most common themes. Menstruation as a means to an end to reproduction, ovulation, fertility, and unsuccessful fertilization were mentioned in all seven textbooks. The focus of all menstrual content found in the textbook is reproduction, emphasizing that “a női szervezet minden hónapban felkészül

arra, hogy utódja legyen" ("the female body prepares every month to have offspring") (78TA, p. 218). On the other hand, menstruation-related disorders and female reproductive organ diseases were covered in one textbook, underlining the negligence of women's health.

After analyzing the texts according to their textual and visual content, I identified three main themes across the seven biology books: (1) menstruation as the reproductive organ system, (2) lack of information about the complete menstrual cycle, and (3) contraception and conception.

1. Reproductive Organ System

The most apparent theme of the Hungarian biology textbooks regarding menstruation is their focus on the reproductive organ system. The textbooks are limited to the physiological biological functions of menstruation, and even in this lens, the focus is menstruation as a means to an end, namely, to reproduce. Texts primarily frame the discussion around reproductive anatomy, like the naming of the external and internal organs and sexual functions, pushing the menstrual cycle to the background within the narrative of the 'beauty of reproduction and children.' While I acknowledge the importance of menstruation as a significant biological phenomenon tied to reproduction, a broad scope of topics should be covered in educational materials (Bobel 2019; Quint 2022).

The choice of words and their connotations when describing menstruation is neutral at times, using phrases like "vérzés közben leválik" (detaches during bleeding)(78TB, p. 193); however, in most books, the usage of negative connotations is present, with words like "elhal" (dies), and "elgyengült" (weakened). For instance, one textbook explains that "Ha elmarad a megtermékenyítés, a méh megduzzadt nyálkahártyájának felső rétege elhal, és vérzés kíséretében leöklődik, ez a menstruáció," ("If fertilization does not occur, the upper layer of the swollen lining of the uterus dies and is shed accompanied by bleeding; this is menstruation.")

(78TA, p. 218). This language emphasizes the biological processes in a way that may be perceived negatively, framing menstruation as a sign of failed reproduction. This framing was also found in Martin's study, which states that menstruation is often described as a sign that women are not continuing the human species (Martin 1988, p. 248).

Textbook exercises at the end of chapters and discussions gravitate toward the topic of fertility and the fertile window. Practice questions such as "Calculate which day ovulation will happen" (78MA, p. 179) and "What are the consequences if conception did not happen?" (78MA, p. 180) are given to students to reflect on the menstrual cycle.

The overarching theme in chapters mentioning menstruation is directed toward the reproductive organ system, fertility, and infertility concerns. Menstruation is covered as a tool to reproduce and only described with the bare minimum information.

2. Lack of Information on the Complete Menstrual Cycle

Throughout my analysis, I found a significant lack of information on the menstrual cycle in biology textbooks, which would effectively advance students' knowledge about menstrual health. I identified the information gaps by applying Quint, Bobel, and Blackmore et al.'s studies to determine the essential themes in menstrual education (Blackmore, Moran, and Wigginton 2024; Bobel 2019; Quint 2022). These studies emphasized the need to cover topics such as the entire menstrual cycle with its various phases, the naming of organs and body parts, the variety of menstruators' experiences, menstrual products and their usage, vaginal discharge, healthy and unhealthy signs of menstruation, and dismantling taboos and stigmas surrounding menstruation. Further, I also applied the definition of menstrual health by Hennegan et al. in order to identify the elements that must be introduced in educational materials to talk about healthy period education (Hennegan et al. 2021).

The seven textbooks often name the external and internal organs related to the menstrual cycle, describe that a cycle is 28 days long, and some mention the usual duration of bleeding. Additionally, the books generally discuss some of the hormones that regulate the menstrual cycle.

However, the textbooks do not mention information essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of the cycle, which would empower students to make informed decisions about their bodies (Bobel 2019). All textbooks fail to recognize that the assumption of a standard 28-day cycle is a misconception and do not mention the significant variety in cycle length and duration of bleeding days that menstruators experience (Bull et al. 2019; Li et al. 2023). There is no information on the pain and discomforts of menstruation other than in one textbook which only mentioned this topic in one sentence: “A nők nemi rendellenességei közül igen gyakoriak a menstruációs fájdalmak és vérzési zavarok.” (Among women's reproductive disorders, menstrual pain and bleeding irregularities are quite common.) (910TB, p. 203). The absence of talk on menstrual discomfort and disorders is a harmful practice as it normalizes intense pain and underlying conditions (Guidone 2020). This neglect undermines the well-being of menstruators and hinders their right to health, which could be achieved by acknowledging the pain and diagnosing conditions. Additionally, diseases related to the uterus were only mentioned if it caused infertility, like endometriosis, which further underscores the previous theme of reproduction. Out of the seven books, there was only one mentioning diseases like breast cancer, polyps, and cervical cancer as important illnesses to bear in mind. This book, nevertheless, also mentioned HPV vaccinations as preventative vaccinations against cervical cancer (910TB, p. 203). Another element that was left out of the discussion is the negative impact of stigmatization on menstruators' well-being, hindering the establishment of a positive and respectful environment that would minimize psychological distress (Hennegan et al. 2021).

Lastly, I found no mention of materials and products that help menstruators care for their body throughout their cycle. All of the above-mentioned absence of information could imply that menstruation is a solely biological function that menstruators should deal with and manage on their own and privately. Based on the emphasis on information in the textbooks, it seems like menstruation should be taught and discussed exclusively related to reproductive functions.

3. Contraception and Conception

Connected to the focus on reproductive functions, the final theme can be associated with contraception and conception. Menstruation is linked throughout all textbooks to both topics through its involvement in the reproductive process. These topics arose as a main theme as they were usually placed directly after the textbook content of menstruation. As all menstruation content was linked to (failed) reproduction, contraception and the role of menstruation were also mentioned in chapters like “Sexuality” and “Family Planning.” For example, under the subchapter “Nem tervezett nehézségek” (Unplanned difficulties) (910TA, p. 145), the textbook discusses infertility concerns, where endometriosis is listed as a painful disorder that comes with fertility issues. However, endometriosis and its implications are only linked to reproduction under this subchapter, while there is no mention of this disorder under the menstruation chapters. Textbooks gave more space to explaining safe sex practices and contraception methods, from methods like the natural basal body temperature, condoms, and contraceptive pill to tubal ligation; however, there was no mention of period products. One of the textbooks claimed that girls whose cycles become stable can take hormonal birth control pills without expecting any side effects. This claim dismisses all the serious side effects that hormonal birth control pills cause and further normalizes the usage of such contraceptive methods without considering any advantages or disadvantages of this method (Martell et al. 2023).

Other than introducing contraceptive methods, textbooks went into more detail about methods of fertilization, conception, fetal development, pregnancy, and birth. These topics were covered to a greater extent compared to the menstrual cycle and bleeding. The general ratio in which menstruation was mentioned compared to contraception, pregnancy, and family building is 1:7. Meaning there were seven pages devoted to conception and contraception, while there was one page covering menstruation.

Additionally, there are no images of women throughout the chapters discussing menstruation; however, there are few images of pregnant women in the “Family building” chapter.

This imbalance of content ratio highlights the textbooks’ prioritization of reproductive themes such as contraception and conception, mentioning menstruation only when it is essential for this discussion.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to analyze the extent to which menstruation-related content is covered in Hungarian textbooks and see how these textbooks perpetuate the stigmatization of menstruation and portray gender roles.

Regarding the extent of menstruation-related content, most textbooks covered the standardized 28-day cycle, female reproductive organs, listed hormones involved in the menstrual cycle, and highlighted menstruation's role in reproduction. However, they disregarded comprehensive explanations of the cycle, menstrual pain and discomfort, and diseases like cervical cancer, polyps, and premenstrual syndrome. To answer my research questions on the coverage of menstruation content in Hungarian textbooks and how they perpetuate stigmatization of menstruation and portray gender roles, I identified three main themes: (1) lack of information on the entire menstrual cycle, (2) focus on the reproductive organ system, and (3) emphasis on contraception and conception.

Throughout my analysis, I noted that there was no mention of what kind of menstrual products exist and what the purpose of each product is. Textbooks also neglected to expand the menstrual vocabulary by adding terms like “menarche” into the content. Further, they overlooked common menstrual issues, such as extreme pain and polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), and failed to address signs of healthy or unhealthy signs discharge, all of which are crucial aspects of understanding menstrual health.

According to my findings, all textbooks have lacked a comprehensive education in the Hungarian context, and there are reasons to believe that misconceptions and myths about menstruation are being reinforced in the current curricula (Blackmore, Moran, and Wigginton 2024). I was not able to find a holistic and inclusive approach to menstrual education in the textbooks. As stated by Bobel, Quint, Curry, and Blackmore et al., these are vital points to

ensure the dismantling of the stigmatization of menstruation (Blackmore, Moran, and Wigginton 2024; Bobel 2019; Curry et al. 2023; Quint 2022). Menstruation was consistently mentioned in the reproductive sphere, never mentioning its general health implications and describing menstruation as a vital sign of health (Stubbs and Sterling 2020). An inclusive approach was missing as menstruation was described based on heteronormative standards, strictly describing menstruation as a function of women. These missing approaches and information reinforce the general narrative and attitude on menstruation and gender roles in the Hungarian context that are also present in the narratives of the government's gender politics.

The themes of reproduction, contraception, and conception additionally play a significant role in the creation of the narrative about menstruation and gender roles established in Hungary. I found these two themes closely intertwined with each other as these topics are in primary focus when discussing menstruation in the seven biology textbooks. The content of menstruation is mostly limited to the theme of reproduction and only introduces information about the menstrual cycle that is essential for the explanation of the reproductive system. Exercises and texts are directed towards fertility (calculating the fertile window in the menstrual cycle), infertility and assisted reproductive technologies (ensuring that there is a way to become pregnant), and menstruation being a sign of unsuccessful fertilization. According to my findings, there is a dominant narrative about menstruation strictly in relation to the reproductive system. This continuous underlining of menstruation's reproductive function also leads to a narrative of menstruation being a failed fertilization, which Martin also concluded as a negative outcome of the cycle (Martin 1988).

In Hungary, since birthing is being financially stimulated through government policy ("baby grant"), as Sata also highlighted (Sata 2021), a risk is being posed by the construction of a guilt mechanism in menstruators regarding every period as another unsuccessful chance at

fertilization. This rhetoric and other policies of the Fidesz government, which primarily support women as mothers, create the portrayal of Hungarian women as “baby machines” who should remain primary caretakers of families and bear the responsibilities of birthing more children for the country.

I do not disregard the primary function of menstruation; however, as Inga Winkler also claimed, there is “so much more” than reproduction when discussing menstruation (Winkler 2020, p. 9). Diorio and Munro also claimed that menstruation is only embedded in the reproductive curricula, which can reinforce heterosexist conceptions of sexuality and gender norms, thus failing to present menstruation in an inclusive way (Diorio and Munro 2000). Social, political, structural, financial, and psychological aspects of this biological phenomenon should be touched upon; however, there is a real lack of discussion on the complexity of this subject in Hungarian biology textbooks.

The fundamentality of menstruation is missing from the discussion as there is no conversation about the social dynamics that further reinforce the stigmatization of menstruation, like the dominance of patriarchal structures that are influencing nearly all spheres of life (Bobel 2019). For example, the continuous use of euphemisms people use to refer to menstrual bleeding (Erchull et al. 2002), the advertisements portraying women in an unrealistic way throughout their cycle (Jackson and Falmagne 2013), and the overarching concealment and secrecy narratives (McHugh 2020) underline the social dynamics shaping attitudes towards menstruation that Hungarian school books fail to address.

The psychological impacts of stigmatization on menstruators, like self-consciousness and internalized shame (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013), are also disregarded from menstrual conversations in textbooks.

Additionally, from a medical and health perspective, the idea of menstruation as a vital sign of general health (Committee on Adolescent Health Care 2015; Stubbs and Sterling 2020) is missing from educational materials. Textbooks neglect to include common experiences of menstruators, like extreme pain and discomfort. Dismissing conversation on the pain levels that stop people from living a normal and healthy life is extremely harmful (Guidone 2020). It prevents menstruators from being diagnosed and treated in time, while also their pain is normalized. For example, the previously mentioned condition, endometriosis, often goes undiagnosed, leading to more severe pain and complications. The lack of awareness of health conditions can also cause misdiagnosis, which prolongs patients' pain and results in inappropriate treatment. Disregarding these health conditions can also create feelings of isolation and distrust in healthcare professionals who tend not to validate menstruators' experiences.

In contrast to having a diverse, holistic approach that describes menstruation as fundamental, a single narrative is presented to students. In my opinion, it creates a stigmatized description of menstruation, as it fails to capture the diverse experiences of menstruators and educate students comprehensively about the entire menstrual cycle. In essence, a single narrative limits comprehensive understanding and leaves stereotypes unchallenged, concealing varied experiences and elements of menstruation. Thus, keeping students uninformed about menstruating bodies, limiting their capacity to make informed decision about menstruating bodies. This observation contrasts Bobel's approach to menstrual education, which emphasizes that students must ask questions and assess options to have agency over their bodies (Bobel 2019).

Connecting the lack of education and the content of educational materials on menstruation back to the theory of Foucault's biopower, this phenomenon could possibly illustrate biopower in Fidesz's Hungary. The Fidesz government has exercised its power before over the contents of national textbooks by altering the history and literature curricula in 2020. The textbooks changed so that they portray historical figures, like Miklós Horthy, in a positive light, despite his role in creating anti-Jewish laws and his close connections with Hitler (NAT 2020)⁵. Internationally renowned author Imre Kertész was replaced by nationalist authors with fascist and antisemitic ties (Schlagwein 2020). Seeing these changes that have taken place in the history textbooks, it can be presumed that ideological motivations are behind this move. Extending this hypothesis to the current discussion, it is plausible that ideological motivations also influence the biology curricula. Given Orbán's strong emphasis on gender and family policies, the curriculum of menstruation could intentionally omit detailed information about the menstrual cycle, focusing only on aspects necessary for reproduction. This lack of information could contribute to Fidesz's broader agenda and narratives, promoting women as primary child bearers and caretakers motivated by political incentives. However, in-depth future research is needed to be able to confirm such assumptions about the Hungarian government's political influence over the menstruation curricula, as my study only focused on the 2020 curricula and did not analyze the menstruation content of previous national curricula.

5 Oktatási Hivatal, Nemzeti Alaptanterv https://www.oktatas.hu/koznevelés/kerettantervek/2020_nat

CONCLUSION

The aim of my study was to analyze menstruation content in Hungarian school textbooks, to determine whether they perpetuate the stigmatization of menstruation, and to examine the narrative they portray about gender roles in the country. Throughout my analysis of textbooks, I found that menstruation is minimally covered. The findings emphasize the absence of a holistic, inclusive, and comprehensive approach to menstrual education. This means that textbooks fail to provide comprehensive education on menstrual health, including information about menstrual product use, menstrual cycle variations, common menstrual issues, signs of healthy menstruation, and generally discussing menstruation as a vital sign of health. Instead, textbooks focus narrowly on menstruation-related content that is essential for reproduction.

Three main themes emerged from my study: (1) the lack of comprehensive information on the entire menstrual cycle, (2) the focus on menstruation within the context of the reproductive organ system, and the emphasis on (3) contraception and conception.

These themes underscore a narrow, one-sided narrative introduced to students, which essentially perpetuates the stigmatization of menstruation and reinforces traditional gender roles that depict women as “baby machines” and primary caretakers. This portrayal of women and female bodies aligns with Fidesz’s current gender politics, which are underlined by the government’s broader political aims. For this reason, this phenomenon could exemplify biopower, instrumentalizing female bodies for the sake of political goals.

Nevertheless, further research is needed to determine the exact political motivations behind the lack of comprehensive menstrual education in the curricula. My current study could contribute to this ongoing investigation and further research on the Hungarian educational materials on menstruation. Additionally, my study raises public awareness of the issue of menstruation inequality in Hungary and contributes to the academic field of menstrual studies, emphasizing the need to critically research menstruation as fundamental.

By shedding light on the lack of comprehensive menstrual education in Hungarian textbooks, this study underscores the broader sociopolitical challenges against gender and menstruation inequality. It highlights the importance of inclusive and holistic education in dismantling stigmatization and reinforcement of gender roles. Through this research, I aim to inspire further academic and policy efforts to address and tackle menstruation inequalities, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive and open discussion on menstruation within textbooks and beyond.

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