

Women and "Pollution"

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Women in modern, reason-based societies know that menstruation (monthly bleeding) is a normal process that marks the beginning and end of fertility. When I was a girl, it was often called "the curse," but one does not hear that today.

I would never have given any more thought to this topic if it had not returned in the news: a Nepalese woman and her two small children died when freezing overnight in a "seclusion hut." Around the world, remnants of this primitive custom remain: banishing menstruating women to huts outside the village lest they "pollute" the community's food and water. What is the root of this custom and in what way does any of this notion still live?

From the beginnings of human agricultural settlements, some 10,000 years ago, men regarded bloodshed in warfare as noble, but women bleeding monthly yet not dying as something eerie. Until the onset of the modern world, this belief in the pollution of female blood governed relations between the sexes.

Anthropologists have defended some aspects of this custom by noting that those societies that ban sexual relations with a menstruating woman (Orthodox Judaism and Islam), protects women from unremitting sexual demands for at least one week a month. Secluding women to menstrual huts (as done by the Zoroastrians and many village Indians) has the same effect of protecting women from sex. In all of these cultures, the end of menstruation is followed by ritual bathing, which then "cleanses" and readmits the woman to the community.

This well might be, but in a recent drama about Queen Victoria, she was compelled to be "cleansed" by the church (called "churching") after childbirth to be readmitted by her religion. She proclaimed it stupid, just as she did when religious authorities tried to prevent women from having ether to dull the pain of childbirth. They cited the Bible that women were cursed to bear children in pain.

Even in 19th century America, where science was just coming into its own, doctors declared that university learning would shrink women's uteruses, rendering them sterile. There were also learned treatises that women's brains were smaller than men's, making them less intelligent and thus unsuited to serious professions.

We need also remember that until the advent of contraception, many women around the world rarely had a menstrual period throughout their reproductive lives; they were always pregnant.

The male fear of female blood has had another bad effect: barring women from many honored activities open to men: military service, government (other than monarchy), or as judges. Women were adjudged to be "emotional" and "unstable" before their periods, thus discrediting them from serious roles in society.

Probably the stupidest comment on this was uttered by former Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, who said "If combat means living in a ditch, females have biological problems staying in a ditch for thirty days because they get infections." This man had a Ph.D, which, unfortunately, failed to make him smart.

Has all this nonsense inherited from our ignorant ancestors vanished in the modern world? Unfortunately not. Notions that women are unstable (and perhaps polluting) persist. Until recently, women running for political office were confronted by this underground claim. As recently as the political campaign for office run by Donald Trump, rumors were circulated about the unfitness of Hillary Clinton, many of them just because of her gender.

Then, when a cheeky female journalist dared to ask candidate Trump about his sexual history, he condemned her, saying "she had blood coming out of her eyes and her--- whatever." This was supposed to render her untrustworthy, nasty, polluting.

The case of the Nepalese woman is a reminder that even when governments ban customs as obsolete, ignorant villagers disobey. This time, it cost a woman and her small children their lives. And as I wrote in last week's column, two women in India violated the rule that women of menstrual age were barred from worship in the temple of a supposedly celibate god. Their action was met by male rage and violent demonstrations. There is no cure for stupidity.

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