Is the menstrual cup filled with capabilities?

A qualitative case study of a menstrual hygiene program in the North West province of South Africa with focus on female students.

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Abstract

School attendance is an important part of socio-economic development. In South Africa school girls miss 25% of their education due to menstrual related issues. The menstrual cup is increasingly considered as a sustainable menstrual hygiene product for girls, and is included in programs for improving menstrual health. This study deals with menstruation in school environments focusing on a menstrual cup program in the North West province of South Africa. Twenty school girls have been interviewed about their thoughts and feelings of menstruation. Also investigated is how the menstrual cup relates to girls’ capabilities to attend school and what obstacles there are for girls’ school attendance. An intersectional phenomenological approach is used together with theories of stigmatization, capabilities and sexualization. The menstrual cup is shown as a way of avoiding the stigma as female students are teased about their menstruation when leaking due to insufficient menstrual hygiene products. Even though menstruation is considered normal, it should kept a secret, especially from boys. Girls’ capabilities improved as they were using the menstrual cup because they did not have to face the embarrassment of leakage. Economic capabilities are enhanced as the menstrual cup is distributed free of charge. Stigmatization and sexualization of menstruation and the female body is presented to affect how girls feel about their menstruation. Conclusively, the cup is not reducing the stigma but reducing the encountering of it. Social change regarding sexualization of women and stigmatization of female attributes must be done for the girls to have full human capabilities.

Key words: menstruation, menstrual cup, capability, stigmatization, school attendance, sexualization
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1. Introduction

One of the most important tools for human reproduction is also one of the most stigmatized subjects in human society. Period, flow, shark week, that week of the month; there are many names for this part of the female reproductive system that of course is correctly called menstruation, which is one of the prerequisites for human life. Despite the fact that half of the world’s population are able to menstruate, there are still several negative societal consequences for menstruating people all over the world. Menstruation is surrounded with taboo and shame and often treated with a ‘culture of silence’ (Chikulo, 2015:973). The shame surrounding menstruation has led to exclusion of women and girls from the society in several ways. Research of the subject reports that due to menstrual related issues, girls in South Africa lose 25 percent of their total education (Chikulo, 2015:973).

This study is conducted in the North West province of South Africa, where existing studies proves menstruation as a taboo subject in some areas. Twenty students in four different schools included in Transnet Teenage Health Program (TTHP) are examined. TTHP is a program conducted by Transnet Foundation in collaboration with the local organization Moropa Development Services and works for the improvement of girls’ menstrual hygiene management. Our study will focus on school girls using the received menstrual cup, their thoughts and feelings about their menstruation and what obstacles there are for school attendance during this time. This will be investigated by qualitative field work with semi-structured interviews. Laying on a methodological platform of intersectional phenomenology, the empirical material will be analyzed and problematized in accordance to theories of stigmatization, sexualization and capabilities.

1.1. Definition of concepts

In this thesis, terms like girls and women will be used in relation to menstruation. We acknowledge that not all females do menstruate, and that not everyone that menstruate are females. But for the sake of simplicity in the study, words like girl or woman will be used as equal to everyone able of menstruation. The students mentioned in the study will be referred to as girl learners or school girls. Moreover, the following concepts are important to this thesis and will be defined further.

- **Menstrual hygiene management** (MHM) is a definition of handling menstruation properly. It involves the use of a clean material to deal with menstruation which should absorb and collect blood. There should also be available spaces of privacy in a safe
manner, soap and water for washing the body as required and access to dispose of used materials (Sommer, Sahin, 2013; see also; Chikulo, 2015)

- **Menstrual hygiene products** (MHP) is a short term for all personal sanitary products used to control bodily fluids.

- **A menstrual cup** is a reusable menstrual hygiene product inserted in the vagina during menstruation to collect menstrual blood. It is typically made of silicone and can last up to ten years (Transnet Foundation, 2013).

- The **mina cup or the m-cup**, is a nickname and short-term for the menstrual cup used by the organization Transnet, which some interviewees are naming the cup. Sometimes the respondents only used the term “mina” when speaking about the menstrual cup.

- **Blooting** is a term used by the interviewees of a situation when one leak blood on the pants or skirt.

### 1.2. Problem identification

The culture surrounding menstruation is filled with a series of myths, euphemisms and a mysterious language, which has been adopted to hide the fact that women bleed from their uteruses. In some cases, the males of the household think of menstruation as an obscure weakness, rather than a biological and normal process happening to most women in a long period of their life (Kirk, Sommer, 2006:2). One example of the exclusion that many women suffer from comes from a study in South Africa conducted by Scorgie (et. al. 2016), where several women witnessed being educated that their menstrual flow would increase in amount if they visited a crowded place. Another example comes from India where, among some Hindus, menstruation is considered as polluting (Shukla, 2005:5).

Menstruation has also become a subject of inequality and class. In Zambia, a study showed that there is a significant knowledge inequality regarding menstruation between women of different social classes. Of the interviewed domestic workers, reportedly four percent had biological awareness about menstruation, in comparison to the questioned so called “professional” women, where 76 percent reported biological knowledge about menstruation (McMaster, Cormie, Pitts, 2009:538). These inequalities does not only regard knowledge and not only apply to lower income countries; several states in the US. put luxury taxes on menstrual hygiene products, making it an economic question to buy these products.

The so called ‘culture of silence’ regarding menstruation has the effect on girls not knowing enough about what is happening in their bodies when getting their period. Not being able to talk about personal experiences along with poor knowledge about menstruation can be
problematic in school settings. Menstruation becomes shameful and something to hide (Kirk, Sommer, 2006:2). If menstruation practices are not managed adequately, they can interfere with a girl’s attendance and participation in school (McMahon et al. 2011). Studies has shown that in low-income countries, girls prefer to avoid school during their menstruation rather than to experience the embarrassment related to menstrual mishaps (Dasgupta, Sarkar, 2008). Some key reasons for menstruating girls being absent from school can be lack of privacy in sanitary facilities, inadequacy of sanitary disposal possibilities, water shortages (Devnarain, Matthias, 2011), insufficient menstrual hygiene products and poor education about the matter (Wilson, Reeve, Pitt, 2014:64).

These circumstances can explain why one of ten school-aged girls in Africa miss school during their periods (WHO, UNICEF., 2013). This study will investigate what obstacles there are for South African girls’ school attendance during menstruation. Interventions for improving school attendance among girls often include distribution of menstrual hygiene products (MHPs), but as will be explained in following chapters, there can be other difficulting factors associated with menstruation than only the access to MHPs. These obstacles can occur in several ways, like stigmatization leading to different forms of exclusion or physical obstacles like unsatisfactory toilets with poor hygiene.

1.3. Purpose
The purpose of this study is to analyze and problematize what thoughts and feelings the girls’ included in a certain MHM program have of their menstruation; what underlying causes that may explain these perceptions and what role the menstrual cup has in their school life. Theories of sexualization will be applied as an explanatory model. Focus circumscribes girl learners’ perspectives with complementary mindsets from parents, principals and teachers. Comprehending the girls’ thoughts and feelings is a relevant research focus in menstrual hygiene studies, since, in this case, the girls are the users of the cup, hence they can provide the main source of how it has influenced their lives. An additional purpose is to identify obstacles for girls’ school attendance by which theories of stigmatization and capabilities will be used in order to attempt to explain these cases.

This study can assist MHM-programs in streamlining the interventions and enhancing the results of them. It may contribute to the growing amount of research on the subject, with evidence if an intervention like Transnet Teenage Health program has been effective in working towards the goal of reducing girls’ school absenteeism. There has only been one previous study in the North West province investigating this subject in the past done by professor Chikulu in
2015, conducted in schools where the girls had only been introduced to the program. We find the strength of the research questions to be the broadening of the perspective, with focus on the main target of the intervention; the girl learners.

1.4. Research questions
- What role does the menstrual cup have in regards to a girl’s capabilities?
- How do school girls included in the MHM-program think and feel about their menstruation and what underlying circumstances can explain them?
- What obstacles are there for girls to attend school during menstruation?

1.5. Delimitations
We will in this section describe what limitations this study encompasses, to clarify the entitled expectation of the results and analyzes. To stay within the confines of a bachelor thesis of ten weeks, this study has taken into consideration some constraints in order to make it producible. We have delimited ourselves to four schools selected by Transnet. A geographical distribution in the province has been taken into account.

The study does not seek to answer how all of the included girls in the Transnet project think and feel about their menstruation, it will only focus on twenty girls in four different schools. It will only focus on students who are using the cup, there might be students who are not using the cup involved in the program which might give different answers. The study does not endeavor to generalize the answers of these girls’ applicability of the cup for all girls using it everywhere, though it might be achievable to draw some modest generalized conclusions based on the empirical findings of this study.

This study will use selected parts of Martha Nussbaum’s capability approach which is focused on women’s capabilities. The research question investigating the obstacles for school attendance during menstruation has target focus on whether stigmatization, non-accessed capabilities and sexualization of female bodies can explain the absenteeism. There could be a greater range of obstacles which have not been investigated. With a careful look at the theorization of stigmatization, this study only focuses on the girl learners’ perspectives, and it accordingly excludes other dimensions of the problem which can be given from e.g. boy learners.
1.6. Disposition

The structure of the thesis follows; the first introducing chapter have problematized the connection on menstrual hygiene management and development and gave definitions of the central concepts and the problem identification. The purpose have been defined, as too the research questions and delimitations of the study. The second part will present the theoretical framework; the methodological approach will be defined and so will theories used in the thesis. The third part will address the methods used, starting with the approach and the course of action. The chapter ends with methodological discussion and ethical considerations. The fourth part will give an historical contextual background of South Africa, the North West province and the areas surrounding the schools. It will also brief the educational system of South Africa relevant to the study and end with practical information about the menstrual cup. The fifth part will view the empirical findings and present topics found on the subject of menstruation in school; perceptions of menstruation, economy, sanitary facilities, shame, teasing, sexuality, talking about menstruation and ability to participate. In the sixth part, the empirical findings will be discussed in an analytical discussion, following the topics on; the capability approach, sexuality and stigmatization. In the last and seventh part, the conclusion will be tying the knot on this paper.
2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Theoretical methodological approach

In social sciences, naturalism and constructivism are two dominating methodological traditions, where naturalism goes in line with the natural sciences’ perspective on the world; that there is one reality. This reality is collected through our senses and experiences (Moses, Knutsen. 2012:7-9). Constructivists, on the other hand, are convinced of the society’s effect on the individual’s perception of the reality, that there are as many realities and worlds as there are humans. This applies also to the scientists, who interpret the scenes in front of them in different ways, which definitely affects the research and “knowledge” (Moses, Knutsen. 2012: 9-12).

The social dimension and the people in it therefore produce and reproduce the way people perceive the society, the world and what is true and false. In conclusion, constructivists argue that social structures are creating and maintaining themselves (Moses, Knutsen. 2012:184). In this paper the constructivist viewpoint is the foundation for the analyzes and discussions of the empiric material linked to the theoretical framework.

2.2. Stigmatization

Stigmatization is a stain or an enduring feature that spoils a person's appearance and divide people from the norm. It is a social process of exclusion or prejudices (Jonston-Robledo, Chrisler, 2013:9; Scambler, 2009:441). The advertisement of menstrual hygiene products and the culture of silence around menstruation are some arguments used for the existence of stigma surrounding menstruation (Jonston-Robledo, Chrisler, 2013). A division of stigma is Scambler’s ‘felt’, ‘enacted’ and ‘project’ stigmas, where the first, according to Newton (2012) is applicable to menstruation. ‘Felt’ stigma is explained by Scambler as “internalized sense of shame and immobilizing anticipation of enacted stigma”. Scambler presents ‘enacted’ stigma as other people discriminating due to the person discriminated being imperfect, and ‘project’ stigma includes ways of avoiding or encountering the stigma (Scambler, 2009:451). Newton thus applies the ‘felt’ stigma to menstruation in that way that stains or other blemishes of menstruation is associated with the feeling of shame (Newton, 2012:394).

The theories of stigmatization can be most useful to this study when investigating the girls’ thoughts and feelings of their menstruation, and why they are thinking and feeling that way. Analyzing the results connected to stigmatization can further help understand how the enduring feature, in this case menstruation, affects the way the person feels about themselves and acts to avoid the stigma.
2.3. Capability approach

Amartya Sen’s (1999) capability approach reflects on a person’s opportunities for choosing to do something they value, and various forms and functions a person can attain. The approach explains how development is an expansion of people's capabilities, as poverty is understood as a deprivation of someone's basic capabilities. Focus of the approach lays not on the outcome, but on the individual ability to choose. Matters that can deprive someone from their capabilities could be ignorance, oppressive states, lack of proper education or lack of economic resources (Sen, 1999:3,4). The capability approach is informational in its focus on individual advantages, and does not offer a recipe of what should be done from this information to better people’s living standard (Sen, 2009:232). The capability approach highlights that a crucial aspect of development as freedom is the participation of women, which is fundamental for political, economic and social development of women (Sen, 1999:203).

Martha Nussbaum complements Sens’ approach in her book “Women and Human Development” (2001). She highlights the certain need for improvement of women’s capabilities, due to the unequal social and political circumstances they are given compared to men (2001: 1). Nussbaum argues that: “Women are not treated as ends in their own right, persons with a dignity that deserves respect from laws and institutions. Instead they are treated as mere instruments of the ends of others, reproducers, caregivers, sexual outlets, agent of a family’s prosperity.” (2001:2).

The fundamental idea of the universal capability approach is what someone is able to do and be, and not about how satisfied one is (2001:71), which also is central to Nussbaum’s
ideas. She highlights that the capability approach is only relevant if it is developed with a focus on women’s prerequisites and opportunities. We should not only ask about the person’s satisfaction with what she does, but what she is in position to do, due to her opportunities and liberties within the societal structure (2001:71). Nussbaum believes that women lack support for living lives that are fully human, and that this lack of support is only and frequently caused by their being as women (2001:4).

Nussbaum lists ten central human functional capabilities central for women and development, this study will include four of these as will be detailed in the operationalization down below. The capability approach could contribute and explain the school girl’s socio-economic capabilities in relation to the Transnet project with focus on the menstrual cup.

Figure 2: Operationalization of capabilities

2.4. Gender and sexualization

One can argue that the reason why menstrual hygiene has been ignored is due to gender inequality (Mahon, Tripathy, Singh, 2015:7). The stigma and taboo about menstruation is a fluent object in patriarchal communities (Fortier, 1975:278). Women pay heavily for their sexuality and are under constant oppression in a patriarchal system as they are being punished for her normal bodily functions, like menstruation (Fortier, 1975:281). Gender is explained by some feminists as a cultural system to categorize male and female sexuality in hierarchical terms. They argue that patriarchal ideologies control women’s reproductive and sexual capacities (Oyèwùmí, 2005).
Murnen (et. al. 2002:360) argues, with Sheffield’s research on sexual violence as support, that in patriarchal societies men are being encouraged to be violent, and women are shaped to be sexually passive (see also Delgado-Infante, 2014). The ultimate goal of this order is to maintain the gender system of women being inferior to men. Protecting the honour and decency of women and their families have long been done through ensuring the woman’s virginity; the control of women’s sexuality is prone in patriarchal societies (Amy, 2008:111). Leclerc-Madlala (2001:541) states, in her research about virginity testing in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa, that the view of the female sexuality in the area is if not contained properly, something dirty and harmful. The description of the culture surrounding the female reproductive system reads: “the female body is the acknowledged site of male sexual pleasure” (Leclerc-Madlala, 2001:541).
3. Methods

Explained in this chapter are the methods used for gathering the empirical material together with the methodological platform of intersectional phenomenology used for analyzing and problematizing the material. Qualitative field research will be motivated and applied to the thesis. The interview process and selection methods will be explained and a critical discussion of the methodology, validity and reliability with ethical considerations will put the final point of the chapter.

3.1. Qualitative field research

Since interpretation and understanding of local experiences, i.e. the girls’ feelings, is in focus in this study, qualitative research is a relevant method (Repstad, 2007:22). Qualitative research methods derive from a tradition of empathic understanding, with emphasis on interpretation, documentation and understanding of practices and backgrounds of individuals, groups and institutions (Frankfort-Nachmias, Nachmias, DeWaard, 2015:242). Qualitative research is, compared to quantitative research, more likely to encounter the real world and get close to people’s perceptions and experiences, as quantitative research does not study specific cases in depth (Denzin, Lincoln, 2013:19). One strength of qualitative research is thus that it can describe people’s realities, which is one main reason qualitative methods are required in this thesis. It also surrounds the processes in that matter, e.g., perceptions, interpretation, language, behaviour, interaction and meaning-making. Qualitative research has also been chosen for this study as it is compatible with fundamental ideas of feminism. There is a decreasing risk of exploitation during field work when using qualitative methods, considering that women are not being treated as objects controlled by the scientist (Rienecker, Stray Jörgensen et al. 2002:375).

3.2. Intersectional feminist phenomenology

This study’s purpose is to present the girls’ views, experiences, feelings and thoughts about the Transnet project, and investigate other menstrual related obstacles for school attendance. The phenomenology method concerns people feelings, thoughts and experiences, and is descriptive of those. The descriptions presented in the results of this study should be as alike as possible to the original, to represent the concerned person’s experiences (Denscombe, 2014:95-97). Making sense of the girls’ thoughts and emotions, can be interpreted through the phenomenological glasses as validating their experiences and placing their everyday perception in center. (Denscombe, 2014:96) It can be also interpreted through the feminist approach of phenomenology as emerging from social structures and historical events (Allen-Collinson,
Investigating the respondent in relation to societal structures is an important feature in qualitative research, the researcher must gain empathic understanding of the social phenomena and recognize the historical dimension of both human behaviour and their own subjective thoughts that may affect the study (Frankfort-Nachmias, Nachmias, DeWaard, 2015:242).

Allen-Collinson (2011:302) labels feminist phenomenology, partly founded in Berger and Luckman’s contribution of social construction of reality through social contexts to sociological phenomenology. They investigated the ‘common sense’ knowledge and its construction of realities, which Allen-Collinson (2011:302) draws to the feminist social-constructivist ideas of what is seen as natural knowledge and human reality. The feminist ideas challenge this constructed reality, and propose a notion of hegemony in the discourse, constructed by white, male, heterosexual persons, i.e. the powerful group of the society. The feminist phenomenology will be used when describing the girls’ experiences; maybe they feel a certain way because of structures affecting their social status in their society. Patriarchal orders in the society and family life may affect girls’ thoughts about themselves and how they value their experiences.

This study will combine thoughts of feminist phenomenology with an intersectional approach. It is important for this study to have an intersectional approach as interviewing and analyzing the results, to understand the voices of the girls not only in their role as women, but with the crossing intersections that may affect them. Using an intersectional approach also allows us to question unambiguous processes, e.g. the binary division of sexes (de Los Reyes, Mulinari, 2005:126). By using the approach when understanding and analyzing, we can engage in certain specific problems without stigmatizing or homogenizing groups (Van der Hoogte, Kingma, 2004:48).

The history and the current structures in the country has brought women of South Africa intersections of various identities which has defined their power and social position (Van der Hoogte, Kingma, 2004:47). The respondents of this study may have overlapping identities of oppression, e.g. if a person is black, woman, indigenous and socio-economically vulnerable, thus the same person can be exposed to double or multiplied oppression by being exposed to different injustices and discrimination at the same time (Edling, Liljeros, 2010:146). Van der Hoogte and Kingma (2004:48-49) disclose how a women in a minority group “...are constrained particularly severely by men within the groups to conform to gender stereotypes and correct behavior”.

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3.3. Semi-structured interviews and managing the empirical material

In phenomenology one aims to describe someone else’s reality, which is often done by semi-structured interviews. This study has conducted relatively unstructured interviews with possibility for deep investigation of matters. The interviews were designed in the way that interviewers suggested subjects and questions, but also invited the interviewee to form the interview of what is relevant to them (Willis, 2006:144). A positive aspect of semi structured interviews is that the interviewer can return to subjects discussed and check that their interpretation of the interviewee’s experiences is correct. This was especially helpful when there were linguistic barriers between interviewer and interviewee (Denscombe, 2014: 99-100).

The interviews lasted between 9 to 25 minutes, and every interview had the possibility and allowance to be recorded which made the transcripts fully comprehensive with events as laughter, nervousness or similar happenings noted. All interviewees have been given pseudonyms, and all the girl learner interviewees can be traced to their schools. The dates and schools of the interviews with parents, principals and teachers are not written, to protect their anonymity since there were only one of each in each school. The transcripts have been made continuously after interviews. The pages of transcripts was first managed by selection of almost half of the material, choosing the quotes and conversations most relatable to the purpose of the study. The material was later divided into themes and categories central to the theories of the study. An appendix of the sampled transcripts is available.

3.4. Selection

This study has conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty girls in the age range of 16-19 years, between 11th and 18th of April 2018. Five girls in each of the four schools were included, each one involved in the program distributing menstrual cups: Transnet Teenage Health Program that reached approximately 7000 girls in all of South Africa. The selection of twenty girls was decided due to time restriction in the field. This study focuses on schools in rural areas in the North West province. The schools visited were: Marikana Combined School, Rekgaratlhile Secondary School, Borokanelo Secondary School and Onkgopotse Tiro Comprehensive School. All of these schools are located in low-income areas, mainly consisting of low-wage earners or unemployed persons.

The study also included interviews with one teacher, one principal and one parent in each school. The reason for interviewing principals, parents and teachers was to collect an additional perspective on the obstacles for school attendance existing due to menstrual health.
In one school there was no parent available to interview. The interviews were made individually and face-to-face, and the researchers were in every situation striving to get the girls to feel as comfortable and casual as possible. The interviews with educators, principals and parents were made both individually and with both of the interviewers present. One interpreter provided by Transnet was available and was attending approximately half of the interviews with the students, though since almost all of the interviewees were nearly fluent in English, no interpretation was needed in general.

The sampling method consisted of various arrangements depending on the school visited. Because we attended the schools during class hours, sometimes there were a cautious situation for the students to leave their classes to participate in interviews. Therefore the selection of girls mainly depended on which of the girls that could leave their class, or as in other cases; the ones willing to participate from a large group of girls that raised her hand in a crowd. Most of the times, the interviews were made during breaks.

### 3.5. Methodology discussion

Menstruation can be a stigmatized subject which can problematize our study. In our case, the region has an existing project that has been in progress since 2010. That fact can possibly lessen the risk of participants finding it difficult to talk about menstruation, due to the fact that they have been in several workshops talking about menstruation earlier. Our key contact in the field is the director of the project we are going to investigate, which can challenge the liability of our study. If there is a biased interest when selecting schools, the process is hard for us to control since we rely on their help to be able to manage this study.

It is crucial in all research that involves social interaction to understand the appropriateness of particular research methods, and to be open and honest in the field about the presentation of results (Brydon, 2006:29). Our appliance of semi-structured interviews with purpose of getting closer to our unit of analysis and to have an open minded entry when interviewing, will circuit a lot of the respondents’ references of what feels accurate to speak about regarding menstruation. A hindrance in this area is linguistic barriers, both the respondents and the researchers can have troubles expressing themselves fully. Problems can arise when the researcher does not speak their main language, or if an interpreter is involved. One aspect that might be a risk would be if the girl learners feel like they are obligated to provide answers in a certain kind of way due to the fact that one interpreter participates. Linguistic barriers were not problems for this study as all of the interviewees spoke English at
a high level. The few cases where the questions were not understood, it was reformulated and processed from different viewpoints. Sometimes the interpreter helped by formulating the question in Setswana, the main language in the region, and the girls were then answering in English.

3.6. **Validity and reliability**

This study has applied a phenomenological approach with semi-structured interviews as a strategy to answer the research questions regarding girls’ feelings about menstruation, what obstacles girls meet when menstruating in school and what role the menstrual cup has in increasing girls’ capabilities. The validity of the study, how the researcher observe, identify or measure the chosen subject is debatable by virtue of the fact that one of qualitative studies’ weakness is that the results gathered rarely can be generalized to be applied to other social contexts, which refers to the external validity (Rienecker, Stray, Jörgensen et al. 2002). Qualitative researchers argue however that the qualitative methods, like interviews and observations, can make the researcher closer to the studied objects’ realities than the quantitative methods. Qualitative research thus creates results more close to the truth as it gives more attention to details in describing the social world (Denzin, Lincoln, 2013:19). Semi-structured interviews in qualitative research are affected by the social context within the research is conducted, and the characteristics applied to the researcher and respondent within that context, thus implicating the generalizability and replicability of the study. The external reliability is therefore weaker in this, and other qualitative studies.

Factors strengthening the study’s internal validity is the theoretical association, connecting to the empirical findings and each other (Rienecker, Stray Jörgensen et al. 2002). The quality of the data and the analyze of it is therefore of most importance for strengthening the validity and reliability of the study. The constant discussions when conducting this study about the results gathered and the connection to the theories increases the internal reliability; that the researchers, as far as possible, are on the same line when interpreting all the impressions of the empirical work.

3.7. **Ethical considerations**

A lot of ethical considerations must be applied to this study, due to the fact that we are in some cases interviewing children, we are ‘outsiders’ of the community which comes with structures and relations of power, and due to the fact that the subject of menstruation can be stigmatized.
The ethics of social research is complex, and especially so when working with children (van Blerk, 2006: 57). Because school girls are our unit of analysis, some under 18, we have to take some key considerations into mind. It is important for us as researchers not to create any situation that may cause harm to those interviewed.

Research can cause inappropriate situations where the researcher's positionality can cause expectations and foster ideas about the research outcome. Informed consent is important in every research situation but especially when working with children. Therefore, the study was explained simply and clearly to those involved (van Blerk, 2006:57). The researchers have no privileged position that justifies them to pursue their interest with any mean possible, the public should always be protected with careful consideration of the physical safety of all participants (Denscombe, 2014:306). This involves ensuring that all participation is voluntary. Our study relies on our contact in field, who did set up all the interviews for us, before arriving to the province she received information about what our study will involve and propose. Since the organization drove us to all of the schools, they also accompanied us inside explaining to responsible personnel what was going on and what kind of research was made; these was obligatory for us to get in to the schools. This situation may cause biased answers from students thinking that we are a part of Transnet, therefore informed consent in the situation was critical in the beginning of the interviews.

Fieldwork in development research involves certain relationships of professional, social and personal character (R.A Apentiik, Parpart, 2006:36). It is essential to reflect on how these relationships may influence the interaction with local people. The positionality of the researcher can alter an interview and the respondent may have propensity to confess or talk about what they believe the researcher they wants to hear (Binns, 2006:19). Our positionality can alter the interview situation due to our role as two white, heterosexual and western persons. Other influencing factors might be our political view, religious faith, historical and geographic location, social class, disability and so on (Foote, Bartell, 2011).

With the ethical considerations in mind, we as researchers always strived to pay attention to our positionality in field; discussing our role in relation to those investigated. This reflexivity has been taken in mind to be able to learn how our world-view might relates and influences the research task. We have also examined our role as writing this thesis with focus on literature, paying mindful attention to non-white and non-western researchers.
4. Historical and contextual background

4.1. Historical area background

To understand and analyze the structures influencing the school girls’ experiences their situation have to be placed in relation to the history and societal structures surrounding them. This chapter will explain the historical background of the area investigated, and will be complemented by South African educational regulations. The information and content has mainly been given orally during meetings and informal interviews in the province.

The North West province is one of nine provinces of South Africa and used to be a part of Transvaal, which was one of the areas that existed in the time of apartheid (1948-1994). During apartheid, the black majority population was forced by the government to live as far from the urban areas as possible as a part of a huge system of oppression. These areas became the so called homelands, as are some of the geographical locations in the current North West. The idea of this forced relocation was to separate the black people from the whites and a large-scale segregation was formed (Butler, Rotberg, Adams, 1978). The homelands were called Bantustans and had self-reliance and autonomy, the residents could become a ‘citizen’ of their homeland, though they had no right of citizenship or any political rights under the nation state. The homelands had a hard time providing for themselves, farming was not a good option due to the poor agricultural land, thus mine-working became a huge part of the employment. This study is conducted in four schools in different areas of the North West province, which consist of 80 percent rural areas. The province is characterized by high rates of unemployment and illiteracy, and HIV/AIDS is a big challenge. Young women have a lack of opportunity to educational facilities and patriarchal structures play a big part of many households.

The area of the first school visited, Marikana Combined School, is a well-known place due to labor protests the 16th of August 2012, when mines in the area shut down. That day, 34 black people were murdered and 78 were seriously injured by the South African security force (SA History, 2013). This event created a huge amount of unemployment in the area and created a situation where many children became orphaned. In the area of Khuma where Borokanelo Secondary school is located, the residents has also suffered from similar events, when the coal mine in the area shut down, poverty and unemployment increased. The area was disclosed to have a mentality of ‘hopelessness’, which goes together with high levels of criminality and drug abuse. In the area of Stella which surrounds Rekgaratlhile Secondary School, a lot of informal settlements take place, many children are living in dysfunctional families and teenage pregnancy is common. Onkgopotse Tiro Comprehensive School in the area of Slurry, is named
after Abram Onkgopotse Tiro, a South African activist who fought for black consciousness, that was murdered by the apartheid state. The majority of the students live in close by hostels arranged by the school, only visiting their families once a term because of the distance to their homes. The surrounding area of Slurry is characterized by cement manufacturing and used to be a farming community.

In South Africa it is compulsory for every child to attend school from ages seven to fifteen. Each province also has the responsibility to provide a place in school for every school aged child. The South African Schools Act also stated that public schools shall be free from discrimination, and that every Head of Department is obliged to keep a record of those children not complying with the compulsory school attendance, of different reasons (Department of Basic Education, 1996). Despite this, many school aged children are missing parts of their, or their entire, education (Chikulo, 2015: 973). The former president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, stated in 2010 that no girl should miss school due to lack of necessary hygiene products (Department of Health and Basic Education, 2012).

4.2. Transnet Teenage Health Program

The politically independent organization Transnet Teenage Health Program together with Moropa Development Services has since 2010 worked in the North West province of South Africa, with multiple action components to improve school attendance for girls during their menstruation. A central part of the project is handing out menstrual cups and promoting the use of it. Since menstrual cups are reusable for 5-10 years, the distributed MHP is still usable after the end of the intervention.

The organization’s purpose is to increase the awareness, education and mentorship about female health and hygiene, and seeks to promote sustainable and environmentally friendly ways of managing menstruation. The program mainly targets girls between the ages of 13 and 19 in rural areas, and instructors are recruited from the local communities. The Transnet Teenage Health Program seeks to give girls a valuable future through education by; 1) minimizing school absenteeism and dropout rates for girls, 2) teaching girls to maintain good and clean feminine health and provides with hygiene products and 3) improve young girls’ quality of life.

The program is divided into three phases with different strategies to achieve their goals. These phases are described in table 1 below.

Table 1: Transnet’ program.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1.</th>
<th>Interactive one-day workshop about several puberty subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2.</td>
<td>Distribution of a dignity pack sustaining a compendium with information, soap, toothpaste, deodorant, menstrual cup and hand sanitizer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3.</td>
<td>Feedback and follow-up sessions nine months after the workshop. The girls are provided with indigenous knowledge about alternatives that they can use instead of store-bought products.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.3. Previous research about menstruation in school

There are several studies focusing on menstruation and the cultures surrounding it, and many of them have produced similar results. Marni Sommer has conducted research on the subject of girls’ perception and experiences of their menses in the school environment (Sommer, 2010), and the role of MHM in improving girls’ school attendance (Sommer, Sahin, 2013). The first study was conducted in rural Tanzania, and the major findings were that many girls experienced poor guidance and information about the menarche, but also felt a joy of growing up and becoming a woman. There was also witnesses of family pressure on marriage after the first menstruation, which in combination with disturbances in school due to menstruation (pain and social disturbances) led to girls dropping out and getting involved in an early marriage. Poor sanitation, boys teasing them about pads, inadequate or non-existing disposal possibilities and expensive menstrual hygiene products were also lifted as difficulting factors for school attendance. Results found in the latter study conducted by Sommer and Sahin (2013) was that there is a need for evidence of interventions that have effectively enhanced girl’s participation, self-efficacy, performance and school attendance, so that every discipline and sector can develop and implement evidence-based and cost-effective interventions for girls and women to use.

Chikulo (2015) conducted a study in collaboration with Transnet Foundation, on the menstrual hygiene management among ten different rural high schools in the North West province in South Africa. In this study, 39,3 % of the interviewed reported restrictions or exclusion being placed on them during their menstruation from home. During their menstruation, girls stated being restricted from participating in a number of activities such as: cooking, touching food and livestock, socializing and attending religious ceremonies. The participants in Chikulo’s study said that the cost of sanitary pads is a significant issue in the household, that their parents struggle to find money to buy disposable pads. Chikulo’s research can be of most use for this study, in order to see if the menstrual cup have made a difference to the girl learners’ obstacles for school attendance and the attitude toward menstruation.
Chikulo’s research can also strengthen the results found. This study will present slightly different results, in contrast to Chikulo’s study, which will be presented in later chapters. Chikulo’s study is the only one existing in regards to menstrual hygiene management in the North West province, more studies on the subject have been requested for actors to raise awareness and create advocacy, resulting in more girls getting their menstrual rights. A common perception encountered is that North West is a “forgotten province”, with many studies in South Africa focusing on the Cape province.

Sommer and Sahin (2013:1558) requested research that investigate interventions which has effectively enhanced girls’ participation, self-efficiency, performance and school-attendance, for the development of more effective interventions. Since this study deals with the perspective of young girls, a strength this study carries is that it is made by two young women, in contrast to the previous research. As the feminist standpoint theory claims, women are in better position than men to see how the patriarchy fails to meet people's needs (Andersson, 2000). The differential aspect carried by this study in comparison to the other accentuated research, is that the focus on the girls are made with an intersectional and feminist approach, and the fact that the study also enhances the opinions of parents, teachers and principals.

4.4. The menstrual cup

The menstrual cup is a reusable and non-absorbent sanitary protection that collects menstrual blood, in contrast to tampons and pads which are absorbing blood, the cup can last up to 10 years. When inserting the cup, it creates a vacuum seal inside the vagina which prevents leakage. The cup can collect approximately 30 ml of menstrual blood at once, and when inserted it can stay in place for about 4-8 hours. The cup used by Transnet Foundation is the mina cup, which is designed and developed to be resilient, soft and flexible, made of a 100 % medicinal silicone (Mina cup, 2017). The mina cup is enhanced to be eco-friendly; it is locally produced and can be used for 5-10 years. Together with the cup, the girl learners are provided with a cleaner, a small container and a textile bag for storage and a brochure explaining how to use it, how to clean it, and “good-to-know”-facts such aspect that you have to boil it for five minutes between each menstrual cycle, for bacterial reasons.
5. Results

Presented here are eight themes of results. The following chapters will present categories collected from the empirical material, deriving from interviews. The themes will be described with quotes from the semi-structured interviews. The first subject concerns a common perception about the normality of menstruation given from the school girls, the following part ia explaining how the girls emphasized how one takes care of the menstruation. The third theme includes how economy is a big part of the providing of a menstrual cup, and in the fourth, the topic of sanitary facilities at school will be described. The three last chapters includes shame, teasing and sexuality thoughts regarding menstruation, and the last one addresses the connection of the menstrual cup and altered abilities.

5.1. Menstruation as a normal part of life

One common perception given by the girl learners has been that menstruation is something normal that will happen through a part of your life, that every girl has menstruation. Some explained fear when first getting their period due to lack of knowledge, but after getting information from a sibling, friend, teacher, parent or Transnet, they explained the belief that it is natural.

“I used to see her apply pads and ask what’s that. She told me this is menstruation this is normal, that when I grow up I’m gonna face the same thing. She didn’t tell me much about it, just to apply it and not why. She told me to stay away from boys” (Interviewee, Amber).

Talking about a conversation between her and her sister. Some girls expressed a desire of acting totally normal in school and around boys during periods, and a big part of that desire was to use a protection that makes you feel comfortable.

5.2. Dealing with menstruation

When handling their menstruation, the importance of being clean and neat was brought up by most girls, and when asked what was the most important thing was when having menstruation, one girl answered “what important is to be clean” (Interviewee, Marinda). Some explained taking baths three times a day when they are having menstruation, to avoid any smell. Keeping track of the days of your cycle was also an important aspect discussed with the girls, they emphasized that they need to be prepared.
The consequences of not bringing, or be able to afford, a satisfactory sanitary product will be discussed in following sections.

5.3. Personal/family economy and menstruation

One of the most central elements brought up in the interviews was the effect on the family and personal economy from the menstrual cup. The fact that the menstrual cup is given out free of charge is facilitating because of the issue that many families would not have been able to buy it without the help of Transnet. One principal expressed something that is descriptive of all four areas visited.

“There is no way they can afford to buy them, that’s why Transnet should give it out free...”
(Interviewee, Olivia).

In some cases where the parents were unemployed or deceased, having a reusable menstrual cup gave the girls a relief not having to ask for money to buy pads, thus making the menstrual cup “stress-free” (Interviewee, Olivia). Buying pads can be a big expenditure for the girls and their families, it is therefore of importance that the menstrual cup is reusable for 5-10 years, it means that they can spend their money on something else.

“...sanitary pads are a challenge of a poor area like this, they will use anything. It will make them uncomfortable and they will not come to school during those periods” (Interviewee, Lesego).

When speaking about the time before having a menstrual cup, when some of the girls were using a cloth or possibly a sock to collect the blood; they described not having a proper sanitary protection due to lack of financial resources makes it probable of school absenteeism during menstruation.

5.4. Sanitary facilities and menstruation

One central theme retrieved from the interviews was the subject of cleanliness in the school toilets, and the impact the menstrual cup has in this context. Both teachers, parents and
principals mentioned the lack of bins for pads as something leading to girls leaving used pads “laying around everywhere” (Interviewee, Xavier). Principals and parents also mentioned that even if there are bins, the girls sometimes do not use it for the pads, leading to blockages in pipes when girls try to flush them down. One girl ventilated that the lack of a bin in the toilet led her to putting her used pad in her school bag, because she did not want anyone else to see her used pad. Other girls said that the dirty toilets made them not wanting to use them, and going home to change their pad or cup instead. One interviewee expressed: “When I get there at the toilet I feel like I can vomit like the toilets are so dirty” (Interviewee, Ngobile). Both students, teachers and principals thought the environment in the school toilet had improved since the girls had received the menstrual cup, that the toilets were more user friendly when fewer girls were using pads. In Appendix 2 there are pictures of toilets in Rekgaratlhile Secondary School.

5.5. Shame, fear, embarrassment and teasing
Surrounding the topic of menstruation is shame, and notions from the interviews has proved that the showing of menstrual blood creates embarrassment and fear. Girls were describing situations where there has been accidents of blooting, i.e. blood staining, with many of them related it to the usage of a cloth, pad or products that are perceived as an insufficient sanitary protection. The showing of blood in front of boys was declared to be especially sensitive. One parent explained how the visibility of a girl’s menstruation, in the shape of visible used pads is perceived.

“...because, it’s not something that you throw away that will be there laying there and it’s like rubbish and boys, for boys to see. In our tradition it’s not good for men to see that you are on your period” (Interviewee, Phenyo).

The communication from girls is consistent; if an accident happens it is connected to shame and fear, one learner expressed the feeling as being: “shy, useless and uncomfortable” (Interviewee, Lara). A persistent fear existed when they used to wear a pad, to bloot in the chair and embarrass themselves, which some mean would make them stay home from school because of humiliation.

“You’ll be very embarrassed because the boys will be laughing and in break time they be laughing at you...and the following day you won’t want to go to school because you were very embarrassed. Scared to go to school (Interviewee, Marinda).
One principal noted that the culture of hiding things from boys is over (Interviewee, Lesego) and one teacher stated that boys knows that menstruation is normal and no teasing exists as associated (Interviewee, Xavier).

When a boy sees a girl with blood in her pants, it is commonly indicated that it is related to teasing. The teasing can in some cases be related to misconceptions about the cause of menstruation.

“...when we are menstruating it means we are not a virgin, we have lost our virginity...they always say that when we are menstruating it’s because we slept with old men and stuff” (Interviewee, Ilse).

When speaking about the menstrual cup in the context of being ashamed and embarrassed, none of the girls indicated that the cup is making them scared of blooting, they told it is easier to come to school now when they don’t stress about the outcomes of leakage. Some girls indicated that misconceptions about the cup creates teasing from boys, some boys would say to the girls that using the cup mean that your vagina is large and that the usage of the cup is abnormal. Overall, the mindset of girls in these situations illustrates that menstruation is a normal thing, that it would not be effortful explaining to a boy that the cup is normal and useful for them.

5.6. Sexuality and menstruation

The topic of virginity and sex was brought up in many interviews when talking about menstruation. To keep the girl’s virginity seemed to be important for both the students and the adults, and menarche was strongly connected with the fact that the girl could get pregnant from then on. Girls were instructed from both teachers and parents to stay away from boys after getting their first menstruation, some witnessed being told not to sit with boys when menstruating; otherwise they would end up pregnant. Some of the girls also said that before Transnet’s workshop, they did not know much more about menstruation than the fact that every girl has it and that they now could get pregnant. The importance of virginity was also touched upon when discussing the menstrual cup. Some girls expressed having a fear that the menstrual cup would break their virginity, and some also said that their parents had the same fear before learning more about the cup. One girl said, when talking about the cup and fear of it breaking their virginity that: “the Transnet people told us if the m-cup is too small to break a girls virginity” (Interviewee, Olivia).
Boys and men’s role in the issue of sex and pregnancy were also discussed, they seemed to be viewed as less responsible of their actions than the girls. One parent, when discussing the culture surrounding menstruation told us about how she think men will act if they see a young girl having her menstruation.

“It’s not normal and it shows those mens that this person is now a big female she can now have babies and it’s like whenever they see that, if men see that, they will take chances that now you are grown up” (Interviewee Phenyo).

5.7. Ability to participate
The improved abilities of the girl learner was highlighted in the interviews in different ways. School absenteeism was emphasized in the interviews to contribute to poor results in school as girls stay home a few days every month due to menstrual-related issues. One principal explained how the availability of the menstrual cup has increased the school attendance, emphasizing how their confidence and self-esteem is improved by the usage. The confidence, he explained, arises from the fact that no embarrassment can come expectantly (Interviewee, Lesego). Many girls also highlighted that they now can perform unlike before, and are able to play netball, dance, swim and… “I can wear jeans, my sports, my shorts, I can jump as high as I want” (Interviewee, Amber).

The socio-economic circumstances of the surrounding areas have been brought up. Some learners are poor and the handing out of a free cup has thus reduced absenteeism; those who usually used pads did not come to school before, but do now (Interviewee, Fidel). Different feelings has been emphasized in relation to using the cup, these feelings has mainly surrounded; confidence arising from using the cup and participating in the workshop, feeling free because one does not have to stress about leakage and safeness because you won’t leak and therefore you won’t be exposed to teasing.

“What I think about the cup...the cup is helping me a lot. Because I can even play a ball when I use m-cup, and run. I feel comfortable. When I was using pads, I don’t feel free, cause I am scared I will (makes a gesture of leaking blood in pants)” (Interviewee, Malaika).
Some girls say that restriction from home and perceptions about menstruation has changed since they were in the workshop and since they got the cup.

“At home they used to tell us, when you are in your menstruation, you can’t play with boys because the blood will increase and flow fast. So I did not use to play with boys when I was on my period...after the workshop then I realized and learned something about menstruation. Now I play with boys during menstruation. I use that m-cup” (Interviewee, Malaika).

Girls learners have also lifted the fact that teachers don’t like students to go up and down in the classrooms, and the cup has therefore been described as a product that enhances the enrollment and participation, because many girls do not longer worry about staining and leaving class to check if they have. Feeling safe from leakage makes a girl able to stand up, present and express themselves, one principal explained (Interviewee, Lesego).

5.8. Talking about menstruation

When discussing whether or not talk to boys about menstruation different opinions were expressed. Some of the girls indicated that they had talked to boys about the subject and that it felt normal and insignificant. Others expressed that boys did not want to hear about menstruation, or that it was not acceptable to speak to boys about the topic because they did not menstruate. Both students and teachers stated that the boys often laughed in the life orientation classes when discussing menstruation.

If and how the girls spoke to family and friends about menstruation was discussed in the interviews. Some of the girls talked to their friends, mostly about the fear of the cup, how to use the cup, period pains and the differences between their experiences of menstruation. The family members seemed to advise the girls to stay away from boys, to keep clean and “keep it as a secret” (Interviewee, Mieke), when discussing menstruation with their daughters. Mothers and sisters tended to explain menstruation as something normal for girls.
6. Analytical discussion

6.1. A cup of female capabilities?

Here, the role of the menstrual cup in expanding the capabilities of school aged girls will be discussed, with grounds in the ideas of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. Both Sen and Nussbaum have interpolated great importance to the capabilities of women, both for women and the development of the society, making this analyze most relevant. Sen describes that, among others, lack of education and financial resources together with ignorance can deprive someone of their capabilities. The uppermost important element of the capability approach is what choices a person have to do something they value. In the context of menstruation in school and with the results collected in this study, several valuable choices can be identified.

One essential aspect the menstrual cup give learners is the capability of school attendance during menstruation. Other extended capabilities takes form as; one girl wanted to go to university but lacked the financial resources. She did not have the money due to that she had to save money for sanitary pads, making her ability to save money for university very small. Poor financial resources and expensive MHPs thus deprived this girl the capability to do something she valued; to attend university. With the menstrual cup given to her without cost, she did not have to spend her money on pads and could place savings for university. These results goes in line with professor Chikulo’s study, where the girls witnessed that the economic situation was further strained by the purchase of pads. Economic benefits gained from using the menstrual cup led to increased economic capabilities for the girls and their families. With a university degree her possibility to change her socio-economic status and escape the poverty trap increase. She thus has the ability to choose her career path, and the number of choices in her life increases. Studies also show, when women gets education, the whole society benefits in several ways (UNAIDS, 2014:139; Gakidou et. al. 2010:969).

The areas of the conducted research are in need of social and economic development as mentioned above, the ability of girls and women’s school attendance create this possibility. Sen brought up the different kinds of deprivation of capabilities, but did not mention why some people e.g. have poor economic possibilities or lack satisfactory education. The socioeconomic and racial composition of the areas described can provide as explanations. During apartheid, as described in earlier chapters, black people were forced out of the urban areas to move to townships often placed in rural areas. The interviews were conducted in rural areas, and all interviewees were black. To ignore this when knowing about the history of the North West and South Africa as a country, would be to neglect an important aspect of the context of economic
capabilities. The reason that these rural families are economically deprived can be because of the societal structures of racial hierarchy, forbidden in legal terms, but segregation and racism was still observed in the societies visited. From an intersectional viewpoint, the respondents have different oppressions overlapping, because they belong to several groups inferior to others, i.e. they are both women (and therefore inferior to men) and black (and therefore inferior to white people). The racist historical context oppressing black people have thus deprived the families’ capabilities to command economic resources, and the patriarchal system oppressing women have deprived girls’ capabilities to command financing for menstrual products from their family.

Other girls expressed a gratitude that they at the present, when using the menstrual cup, can choose to wear tight jeans, play netball or swim, things they felt they could previously not do during menstruation when using pads or other unsatisfactory MHP. The girls interviewed seemed to value these things and felt relieved and happy that they now had opportunity to engage in the activities and choose the clothes they wanted to wear. They explained that when they used pads or other disposable MHPs, they could not play netball, swim or wear tight jeans because the pad could fall down or leak. Martha Nussbaum lists ten central human capabilities, and the aspect of being able to play is one of them. Before the girls had the cup, due to the existing social structures they felt that they could not play netball or swim. The girls were then deprived of one of, what Nussbaum argues is, the most central human capabilities. The cause depriving them of their capability to play can be lack or economic resources and ignorance, due to the fact that society shames the one showing their menstruation, thus ignoring the circumstances that the girl cannot choose to menstruate and maybe cannot afford more sufficient MHPs. With the menstrual cup the girls felt free to swim and play netball; the cup has thus given them the capability to play, which is argued to be central for human life.

6.2. Participation as capability

The participation of women is a central feature in Amartya Sen’s (1999) development of a society. What choices are given to women and how, when and where women are able to participate is, according to Martha Nussbaum (2001), affected by the present social structures. In the case of having menstruation in school settings in the North West in South Africa, this study has detected several social structures affecting girls’ capabilities. One is the taboo and misconceptions about why a girl is menstruating. Teasing and bullying of a girl because she has stains of menstrual blood on her clothes has, according to some of the girls interviewed,
made girls very conscious about and scared of getting stains during menstruation. To avoid humiliation due to this, girls help each other check for stains and are avoiding standing presentations in school during menstruation. Some of the girls witnessed not going to school when they could not afford a satisfactory sanitary product, to avoid the humiliation of staining themselves. This can be seen as the girls being deprived of their capabilities due to ignorance.

Professor Chikulo found that girls in the ten schools in the North West were restricted to participate in more than only school during their menstruation. Girls were not allowed to touch food and livestock and thus not allowed to cook, or to participate in religious ceremonies when menstruating. Even though this study focused on the school environment, the family life and family composition were discussed in interviews. None of the girls interviewed in the four schools stated being excluded from religious ceremonies or house chores. One analyze that can be drawn from this comparison of two studies conducted in the same province four years apart, is that the exclusion from family and religious life due to menstruation was not the same, and the view of menstruation have possibly changed.

Both girls and school staff stated that participation in school have increased since the girls started using the menstrual cup. Their explanation to this phenomenon was that the cup has lesser risk of leaking, compared to other sanitary products used, and thus decreasing the risk of stains. Within the society, and the structures present, girls are deprived of capabilities if they are menstruating and staining from it, even if they only have a fear of staining they are deprived of capabilities. The menstrual cup is distributed free of charge, lessen the risk of staining and decrease the girls’ fear of staining and being bullied for it. Due to this the school attendance and participation in school have increased among girls, implying that the menstrual cup have increased the girls’ capabilities within the existing structures.

Some of our interviewees mentioned the school toilets being insufficient, one girl felt like she could vomit when entering the toilet. Most girls stated that they use the toilet nevertheless, but they did not feel like “dignified beings” with self-respect. These criteria can imply that the toilets could be obstacles for school attendance when related to the capability approach. One interviewee expressed that she at least could feel safe using the toilet when having the menstrual cup, because she could be alone. Though before using the cup, she did not have this feeling of safeness using the toilet because the lack of bins in the toilet. As individuals, these girls are a part of the social structure, with access of a menstrual cup the procedure of having menstruation in school improved because they did not have to throw anything away, whereas the menstrual cup also became a part of bettering the school environment.
6.3. Sexualization of girls’ menstruation - is their menstruation their own?

An attempt to answer the question of what underlying causes can explain the girls’ thoughts and feelings about their menstruation will follow in this and the next chapters. This section will discuss the sexualization of female bodies in relation to menstruation.

One important conclusion made from the results is that many girls had a feeling that menstruation is a normal part of life. The normality of menstruation was associated with what menstruation, biologically speaking represents; the ability to conceive. Girls were told to stay away from boys, when being advised by family members after reaching menarche. The perceived danger of boys and men knowing about a girl menstruating seemed to be strongly linked with that the boys and men knew that the girl was now an adult (Interviewee, Phenyo). Martha Nussbaum argues, as described in earlier chapters, that women are not treated as ends for themselves, and gives reproduction as an example. Nussbaum means that women are treated as means for someone else’s end and happiness. This part of her theory is very much applicable to the results found in this study; that menstruation is placed equal to being able to become pregnant. From this perspective, menstruation is a sign that the girl is ready to conceive, and therefore ready for sexual activities. Her menstruation is thus not only hers; it belongs to the men because, like interviewee Phenyo expressed it, men will take advantage of the now grown up girl. The results found in this study is similar to those of Sommer’s: as found in her study, after menarche girls were pressured to early marriage. Girls are seen as mature after getting their first menstruation, and ready for the adult life and all it means.

The girls’ own sexuality and their enjoyment of sex was never brought up during the interviews, only that the boys could take advantage of them was pointed out when discussing sex. This discourse strongly relates to the ideas of Marsha Nussbaum about girls and women being sexual outlets; instruments for other people’s ends. The girls did not seem to be allowed a sexuality of their own, they were mere passive sexual beings.

Theories of gender and sexualization of women also include the discussion of female sexuality, and is associated with Nussbaum’s thoughts. Leclerc-Madala (2001:541) stated “the female body is the acknowledged site of male sexual pleasure”, which can be understood as the female bodies being passive and not made for their own happiness; they were made for the pleasure of men. The results found in this study can apply to this theory when girls (and adults) think that they should stay away from boys, because boys can make them pregnant. Never in the interviews were the boys’ responsibilities in this matter brought up. It can therefore be analyzed that the boys’ sexuality and lust is acknowledged, and they did not seem to be shamed
for it. The place for their sexual pleasure is the female body. For the girls to escape shame and disgracing their family, they hide their menstruation and the fact that they are biologically ready for sex.

When speaking of men’s and women’s sexuality, feminist theories can contribute to the discussion. The above explained theories of women’s sexualities, describe the view of female sexuality as something dirty and potentially dangerous, and that a girls’ virginity keeps the family’s honor. Can this social construct of sexualities explain the girls’ fears of the cup breaking their virginity? This concern was expressed by the girls when discussing their relation to the menstrual cup. One thought deriving from this, is that the girls were so keen on keeping the family’s honor that they would not do anything to risk it. Even though almost 50 percent of women do not bleed during their first intercourse, which is seen equal to the breaking of the mythical hymen, to bleed and thus break the hymen during intercourse is viewed as the number one sign of a girl losing her virginity (Amy, 2008:111). Therefore, the girls feel the pressure to have their virginity “intact” to not throw away her family’s honor. The dirty, dangerous female sexuality is thus restricted so far as to the choice of MHP, and not only the choice of having sex.

6.4. The menstrual cup, a way of avoiding the stigma?
This part will discuss the the perceived forms of stigmatization in the context of menstruation in this study. Stigmatization and the connection to menstruation is by Newton only understood in forms of ‘felt’ stigma, meaning the “internalized sense of shame and immobilizing anticipation of enacted stigma”. We will in this chapter present how the findings of this study also may fall in line with the two other parts of the theory, ‘enacted’ stigma, being other people discriminating due to the person affected being imperfect, and ‘project’ stigma which includes ways of avoiding or encountering the stigma (Scambler, 2009:451).

Most of our respondents think that menstruation is something normal even though it should still be treated in a certain way that is mainly focused on the concept of hiding. Counting and planning the days of the menstrual cycle and persistently washing (to avoid smells), can be linked with ways of avoiding. When always in control, the girls could pass being exposed to the stigma which goes in line with ‘project’ stigma mentioned by Scambler (2009:451).

The leakage of blood, blooting, is the incident where the girls risk being exposed and stigmatized. This is described in a different sequence of events, when not having the menstrual cup the girls fear blooting on their pants or skirts and spreading blood over chairs. There is also a connection to the insufficient sanitary facilities where there might be no bins, and you have
to expose your pad to the public. Some girls explained how there were pads laying around everywhere at the school area, these events made them feel like they did not have dignity. The term dignity has been a recurring term which seems to be used as a phrase to control and be in charge of the stigmatization. As some girls explained, dignity is related to your self-respect (Interviewee, Olivia, Mbali, Amber); you have to handle your menstruation properly for no one to see, especially not boys. This could be described as a kind of internalized sense of shame of the stigmatization, as the ‘felt’ division of Scambler’s theory emphasize. Even if the girls think that their own menstruation is just normal, they adopt to the social structure saying that menstrual blood is disgusting and embarrassing. There were no signs in this study of girls challenging the stigma or that the stigma has decreased in line with the project, rather, this study may discuss that the menstrual cup is a method for girl learner’s to avoid stigmatization and accordingly, the encountering has decreased.

Some girls meant that if you are throwing pads all around and not taking care of yourself properly during menstruation, you don’t love yourself. This could be argued to be an internalized shame that the girls think and feel; affecting existing structures make them point the discrimination to themselves and people in the same situation as them which is relatable to the ‘enacted’ stigma, as discrimination by others for being “imperfect” (Scambler, 2009:451). With the menstrual cup the girls do not have to face the stigma of blooting in school, which could spoil their appearance and by that divide them from the norm; when using the cup they could feel safe, free and comfortable during menstruation. Marinda emphasized how she would feel if she would leak menstrual blood: “I would be very embarrassed because I won’t be able to go out on the break and be free as a girl”’. The phenomenon of blooting would in this context be the social process of exclusion interconnected with prejudices, which lead to shame and teasing (Jonston-Robledo, Chrisler, 2013:9; Scambler, 2009:441).

Ignorance can be an indicator of stigmatization, as boys in the study were sometimes mentioned to ignore the biological knowledge they were taught about menstruation. One girl emphasized how boys were teasing girls due to their menstruation, the boys told them that the cause of menstruation was that they have had sex with older men. The boys were thus ignoring the knowledge taught in sexual education class (Interviewee, Ilse). This could make the girls stay at home because of the humiliation, and this behavior follows the aspects of ‘felt’ and ‘enacted’ stigma (Scambler, 2009:451). Teasing and bullying related to leakage as explained by Marinda again: “You’ll be very embarrassed because the boys will be laughing and in break time they be laughing at you…and the following day you won’t want to go to school because you were very embarrassed. Scared to go to school”.

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Using the cup creates an absence of the stigma, as the teasing would still occur if someone would leak. Chikulo’s study, showed that cultural beliefs, myths and taboo by occasion lead to stigma and that 39,3 % had exclusion being put on them from home. This exclusion can be seen as stigmatization of menstruation affecting the girls’ lives. None of the girls using the cup in this study expressed any means of exclusion being placed on them at the time of using the cup. The girls expressed that they now had the ability of avoiding leakage in a sustainable way and had also obtained knowledge about the menstrual cycle and other key topics. As one girl enhanced; she was encouraged not to sit with boys during menstruation when she grew up, but after the workshop with Transnet “...I realized and learned something about menstruation. Now I play with boys during menstruation. I use that m-cup” (Interviewee, Malaika).

From what this study has found, the Transnet intervention has not succeeded in reducing the social stigma of menstruation, but created an absence from it. There still is stigmatization of menstruation in the societies visited, but the girls are not exposed to it when using the cup.

One girl declared an attempt speaking to boys about menstruation thus trying to challenge the stigma in a small scale and the boys answered: ”no, don’t tell me about those things” (Interviewee, Priyanka). Why the girls are not further challenging the stigma, and thus changing their situation, could possibly be explained with the societal structures making women inferior to men, affecting their self-perception about menstruation. A societal change would be needed regarding the overall view of the woman as an end for herself (as presented in the ‘sexualization’ chapter), for girls to be able to feel comfortable during menstruation with or without leakage.
7. Conclusion

Girls in South Africa lose 25 percent of their total education due to menstrual related issues (Chikulo, 2015: 973). This study has dealt with girl learners’ thoughts and feelings about their menstruation, obstacles for school attendance, and the menstrual cup and its connection to capabilities. Semi-structured interviews has been conducted in four different schools in the North West province of South Africa, with a feminist phenomenological outlook. The menstrual cup distributed by Transnet is free of charge for the girl learners and it was stated by the interviewees in this study to lessen the risk of staining and thus decrease the girls’ fear of leaking and being shamed.

Stigmatization of menstruation and shame surrounding it has been prone in the societies visited, leading the girls to being deprived of their capabilities to go to school. One of the most important results from this study is that the menstrual cup has been shown to be used as a means of avoiding the stigmatization, as the girls do not have to face embarrassment and fear of staining themselves while using it, as the stigmatization is still present in the society. The empirical material presented that stigmatization has been present by teasing, a culture of hiding the menstruation, and that the level of sexualization of girls and their menstruation is high. The described stigmatization has acted as obstacles for school attendance. Shown in this study, the menstrual cup have increased the girls’ capabilities for school attendance within the existing structures. Girls’ capabilities of choosing to do something they value have also been increased; the girls expressed that they, with the cup, have the choice of what clothes to wear, what activities to engage in, and the choice to save money for university.

An implication this research suggests to menstruation related interventions would be to include other genders than girls to develop MHM-programs to be more holistic. The holistic implicating the including of prevention and grassroot-level approaching of MHM, instead of only reducing existing problems. The findings of this study concludes that Transnet Teenage Health program has been effective in reducing school absenteeism, though it has not reduced stigma but created an evasive mechanism for it. Future studies may include respondents included in the project who are not using the cup. The including of other sexes in studies about menstrual hygiene management and stigmatization could also investigate and problematize from a more holistic view.
8. Reference list


Murnen, S. K., Wright, C., Kaluzny, G. (2002). If “boys will be boys,” then girls will be victims? A meta-analytic review of the research that relates masculine ideology to sexual aggression. Sex roles, 46(11-12), 359-375.


Appendix 1

Logbook for thesis “Is the menstrual cup filled with capabilities?”

This thesis has been written by Hanna Hellström and Louise Johansson. The workload has been divided equally between both authors with an even amount of effort.

The process have in most cases started with mind maps created together with discussions about the content in the chapter in question. Then, individually, the text of matter was developed to enhance the effectivity in the sparse amount of time we had. The text was then revised a number of times, it was corrected and additional parts was added by both authors. It is thus difficult to keep track of who of the authors wrote what part.

The interviews were divided in the way that one of the authors had 15 and the other 16. Each had responsibility for the transcription of their own interviews, which were then read by the other for a full picture of all empiric results. Both picked what was most relevant in each interview, and from that material the categories presented in the results chapter were created. Both authors revised every transcript for the creation of categories, not to miss anything important or for anything to be placed in the wrong category.

Throughout the entire field work and during the work of revising the transcripts, discussions and analyzes were brought up by both Hanna and Louise. The analyzing thus began right after every interview, when the material was discussed and problematized with the picked theories in mind. When beginning to write the analyze, mind maps were created and an agreement between both authors was made of the content of each analytical chapter. A draft of each analytical discussion was made individually for the sake of efficiency, and then revised by the other, who added parts and corrected the existing content.
Appendix 2
Pictures of toilets in Rekgaratlhole Secondary School