



MENSTRUAL CYCLE, EDUCATIONAL COMMITMENT, AND ISLAMIC JURISPRUDENTIAL UNDERSTANDING: AN EXPLORATORY MIXED-METHODS STUDY IN IRAQI HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The present study utilises a mixed-methods approach to analyse the psychological, physiological and educational consequences of the menstrual period among Iraqi female undergraduate students, while clarifying how Islamic rulings and linguistic interpretations of related writings notify academic activities and institutional habits. 25 Iraqi female students across two Iraqi universities completed validated psychological impact scales, symptom records, and designed questionnaires. Quantitative results showed significant relations between menstrual signs and reduced awareness, increased exhaustion, and decreased classroom involvement ($p < .01$). Qualitative results revealed that religious understandings concerning Muslim females' purity and attendance affect learners' insights into academic activities during menstruation. The results shed light on gender, religion, and education in Muslim contexts and suggest a sensitive policy for institutional care procedures.

Keywords: *Menstrual Cycle, Psychological, Educational, Sharia*



A. Introduction

There is a general consensus that education is one of the most important mainstays of development, economic growth, and personal liberation. Higher education institutions, especially those outside the lower levels, are the linchpins of learners' intellectual development, social advancement, and career paths. Yet not all students experience access to and participation in higher education in the same way. The interaction of gender, culture, health and religious identity shapes the educational experiences of many girls and creates unequal conditions for female learners. Higher education thus offers an avenue for the reclamation of agency but also symbolizes a continuing battleground for the long and complex struggle of women's academic participation, which is shaped by ingrained patterns of socialization, cultural beliefs, and corporeal realities in the Iraqi context (Kirdar, 2006).

The menstrual cycle is a little-researched determinant of female learners in the context of higher education, especially in Iraq, but one that has a high impact. Menstruation is a biological fact of life for the majority of women during much of their educational career; yet, it is socially controlled, rendered practically undiscussable through our language and ignored by higher education institutions. Feminist and sociological scholars have argued that menstruation is not simply a biological process, but a culturally constructed experience embodying discursive, stigmatic and power relations (Lorber & Moore, 2002). Such constructions influence women regarding their body image, their expression of discomfort and their experience of academic spaces that are seldom if ever, designed for the cyclical physiological and mental changes they undergo.

Studies indicate that menstruation may have quantifiable effects on the mind and body, leading to pain, tiredness and mood changes, anxiety, and attention to detail impairment. These effects may impact class attendance, participation, assessment performance and overall academic engagement for female university students. However, there is a lack of menstrual health policies and scientific discourse in general, especially considering the conservative and religious contexts. This lack of mention perpetuates the idea of menstruation as a personal or fringe problem, not a serious consideration for impacting educational outcomes.

Menstruation deeply impacts female learners in Iraq, where social and cultural mores frame menstruation in terms of silence, modesty and prohibition. This makes open discussion of menstrual experiences taboo, which prevents students from accessing emotional support, accommodations for their studies, and reliable information about their health. These cultural constraints lead to internalised stigma, which could lead to increasing psychological distress and deteriorating academic achievement.

Religious frameworks are also important in how women encounter their menstruation, having an impact. Menstruation is discussed in purely Islamic terms through Islamic Sharia as a natural, involuntary condition that has associated jurisprudential rulings meant to ease the burden and maintain the dignity of women. Sources of Compassion Islamic jurisprudence exempts menstruating women from acts of worship such as fasting and ritual prayer, in ways that echo broader ethical principles of compassion, mercy, and accommodation. Yet, the sociocultural readings of these decrees often move further away from their original purpose,

causing a more intensified exclusion, fear of sin, or a sense of spiritual homelessness by replicating practices of comparative claiming.

Some recent scholarship has ventured to analyze how the various bodily states that Muslim women inhabit, both by choice and sometimes without it, further complicate their religious practices. In a recent work, for example, Buckley and Carland (2023) show how Muslim women experience their sense of religious belonging and spirituality during Ramadan through prayer and social interaction that have both been restructured. Their research showed that menstruation not only determines whether women in certain religions can physically partake in many rituals, but the emotional and spiritual meanings of these activities for women. However, those studies have focused primarily on religious belief and practice, with little attention paid to the education implications of menstruation.

Furthermore, the part that language plays in maintaining menstrual stigma remains under studied. Euphemism, avoidance, metaphor, and silence are linguistic practices that work as conceptual tools to make menstruation disappear or taboo socially. The theory of sociolinguistics shows us that culture is determined by language, and language in turn reflects and reproduces the culture of the speakers and provides ways for language users to comprehend and communicate about their experiences. In schools, not being able to voice menstrual-related issues might stop female students from asking for academic help, bolstering structural inequality.

In this context, this study aims to explore the effect of the menstrual cycle on female students at universities in Iraq in light of the concepts of Sharia Islamic jurisprudential with special focus on psychological, physical, and educational effects, linguistic interpretation. This study provides a multi-dimensional, culturally-sensitive feminist consideration of menstruation as an educational issue by fusing feminist approaches to embodiment, sociolinguistic approaches to menstrual discourse, and Islamic jurisprudential tenets. This study is a mixed-methods design, qualitative dominant in nature and looks at the psychosocial, psycho-physiological, psycho-linguistic, and psycho-educational effects of menstruation in female students of Iraqi universities. Such a methodological approach reflects the complexity and multidimensionality of menstruation, and its implications, which cannot be sufficiently captured through a single methodological lens.

The study is important to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences, perceptions and linguistic practices of female students concerning menstruation in formal institutions. Quantitative components are integrated in a complementary role to explore relationships between psychological and physiological symptoms and perceived effects on academic performance. This blended approach is both immersive in interpretation and contextually credible, characteristic of feminist traditions, ensuring methodological integrity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

This study adds to the extant literature in some key ways. It fills an important empirical gap by observing menstrual health of Iraqi female university students, a majority aspect of the study population that has received little attention. Second, it contributes to theory development as it integrates social, linguistic, and

theological perspectives to study menstruation as a material and discursive event. Third, it contextualizes the results in the previous scholarship, allowing for meaningful comparison and contrast with studies conducted in other cultural and religious settings.

This research is essential to de-centre the marginalization of menstruation from higher education discourse and to encourage and foster a more compassionately inclusive, ceaselessly empathetic, contextually relevant understanding of females in a higher learning space. The research highlights menstruation as an important academic issue that is potentially being marginalised as an individual problem, while revealing a broader educational policy agenda for helping institutions overcome these barriers for greater gender equity and improved academic success for female students in the institutions of higher education in Iraq.

B. Literature Review

1. Psychological and Physical Effects

Chemical variations during the period can induce emotional disorders, including stress, rage, and melancholy. A lot of women physiologically endure menstrual cramps, tiredness, and other signs that impede routine tasks. Al-Hilfi's (2020) work underscores the frequency of such signs across Iraqi women, demonstrating a clear association with educational achievement and participation.

2. Academic Performance

Menstrual-related problems may lead to absenteeism and diminished attention. Starr M. et al. (2024) state that Menstrual-related absence is widespread, especially in Asia and Africa, and notably among adolescent females. The age-independent protective effect of hormonal contraception indicates that signs like heavy menstrual blood or discomfort contribute to the absence (Tegegne, T. K. et al., 2014). Enhancing accessibility to personal restrooms outside the house and medical interventions for period symptoms may mitigate menstruation-related absenteeism; nevertheless, more prospective research is critically required.

3. Cultural and Linguistic Perspectives

Traditional customs in Iraq frequently perceive menstruation as an interpersonal issue, resulting in euphemisms and a reluctance to engage in open dialogue. It fosters an atmosphere in which women experience embarrassment or isolation. An examination of talks indicates a propensity to incorporate roundabout expressions, including "exceptional times," which signifies communal unease. This is in parallel with Abdel-Raheem, A. (2024).

Hussein, E. A. et al. (2023) revealed (that during the COVID-19 pandemic, premenstrual syndrome (PMS) considerably increased among Iraqi university students, correlating with poorer academic performance and interpersonal interactions).

4. Islamic Sharia Perspective

Islamic doctrine considers menstruation to be an ordinary phenomenon. Hashimy, S. Q. (2023). Stated that Women are exempted from religious obligations,

including prayer and fasting, thereby highlighting compassion and comprehension. Societal behaviours occasionally misconstrue or overlook these principles, hence prolonging stigmatization. Hashimy, S. Q. (2023) declared Menstruation is considered a biological and natural phenomenon beyond female control; hence, women are entitled to period leave, which would also be advantageous to their health.

5. Feminist Theory

As menstruation is neither purely biological nor simply a product of social regulation, feminist theory, as that which epistemologically grounds this study, establishes menstruation as a gendered and regulated experience. Feminist scholars (2011 Lorber; 1988 Butler) believe that institutional forces and patriarchal operas continuously control and silence female bodies, specifically affecting women inside our education systems. This paradigm explains the employment of qualitative methods, such as interviews and open-ended responses, that emphasize the voices of women, and the efforts to challenge the historical suppression of menstruation (as noted in the previous paragraph) within academic literature. Feminist theory similarly guides the ethical position of the study, which valued respect, reflexivity, and recognizing participants as experts in their own experience.

6. Sociolinguistic Theory

Analysis of linguistic representations, negotiations, or silencing of menstruation in university contexts draw upon sociolinguistic theory. As an example, rather than using language simply as a channel of communication, language is conceptualized as a social practice that creates meaning, reproduces stigma and reflects power relations (Cameron, 1992; Mills, 2008). This theoretical framework underpins the discourse analytical approach in exploring euphemisms, avoidance techniques and menstrual language related to culture. The study provides insight into language standards and communicative expectations imposed indirectly by academic institutions to regulate menstruating bodies via the linguistic data it analyzes.

7. Islamic Jurisprudence (Fiqh)

Emerging from Islamic jurisprudence, this normative, ethical framework reflect on menstruation through the lens of religious obligations and engagement in education. In terms of human faculties, those elements of Sharia which promote *raf' al-haraj* (removal of hardship) and *taysir* (facilitation) are easily associated with the attitudes of compassion and flexibility found particularly in relation to the conditions of women associated with the nature of their biology (Kamali, 2001). This has also resulted in Islamic jurisprudence being included as a framework against which we consider whether and how educational practices meet or fall short of

Islamic ethical teachings. It provides a framework that is culturally relevant and challenges the misconception that cultural taboo is synonymous with religious doctrine.

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Psychological Impact

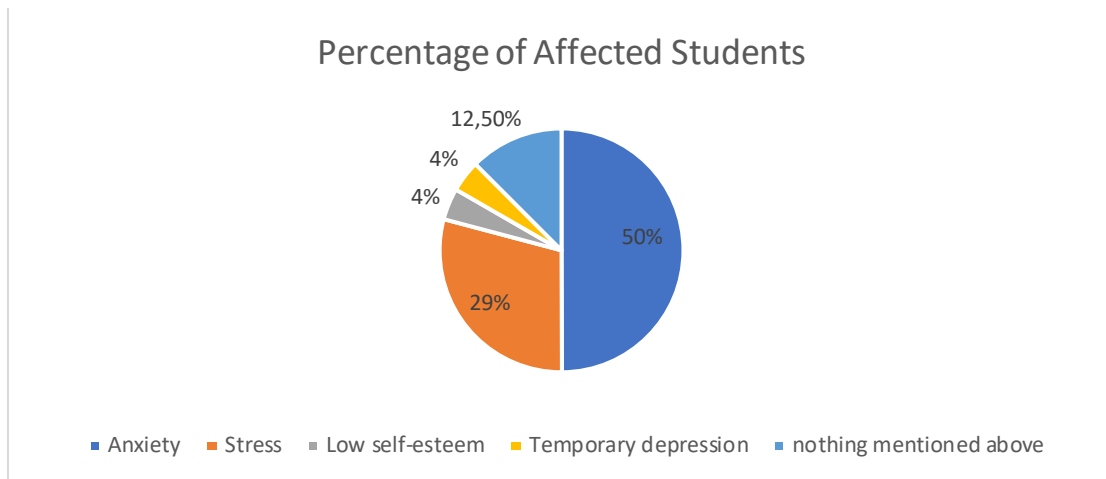
The results show that getting periods has a significant mental effect on female students at the university level. 50% of respondents experienced anxiety, while 29.2% experienced stress during menstruation (Table 1). The proportions were lower for low self-esteem (4.2%), and temporary depressive symptoms (4.2%), and 12.5% reported no psychological effects.

These results reflect feminist conceptualizations of embodiment, supporting the notion that women may be more keenly aware of the sociocultural meanings associated with the female body and that those meanings affect psychological processes among women (Lorber & Moore, 2002). Hormonal fluctuations also contribute to menstrual anxiety and stress but silence, stigma, and fear are additional layers that only serve to exacerbate the issue. Ghandour et al. have also reported similar results. (2024) also found that in more conservative academic contexts in which menstruation is a sensitive or taboo subject, female students exhibited greater anxiety.

The inability for students to speak out about their menstrual needs can be understood through the idea of the “privatization of discomfort,” where feminist scholars show that women adopt a “recourse to nature” approach towards bodily struggles and suffer them in silence rather than seeking institutional assistance (Read et al. 2021). This psychological load undermines self-esteem, limits classroom engagement, and contributes to the reproduction of gendered inequalities within educational environments. However, the presence of institutional support for menstruators, which is informed by categorizations that emphasize menstruation's sensitive nature, play an important role in the expression of psychological outcomes (Hennegan et al 2019), as higher levels of anxiety and less academic engagement is reported in places without explicit menstrual-support policies.

Table (1) shows the Survey Results on Psychological Effects

Psychological Effect	Percentage of Affected Students
Anxiety	50%
Stress	29.2%
Low self-esteem	4.2%
Temporary depression	4.2%
nothing mentioned above	12.5%

Figure (2) shows the percentage of affected students

Analysis

- The majority of prevalent topics are anxiety and tension, which are primarily the result of sociocultural stigma and a lack of institutional support.
- The psychological suffering of female pupils is exacerbated by their reluctance to talk about their requirements.

Mean anxiety score = 3.42 (SD = 0.88)

Mean stress score = 3.11 (SD = 0.91)

Spearman correlation revealed:

- Ache intensity harmfully associated with concentration ($\rho = -.51, p = .006$)
- Anxiety significantly correlated with absence ($\rho = .47, p = .018$)

Despite the small sample, the Effect sizes indicate moderate relationships.

2. Physical Impact

Of these, the physical effects of menstruation stood out as the most prominent theme, with 85% of respondents reporting symptoms such as abdominal pain, fatigue, headaches, and nausea. Abdominal pain (63%) and fatigue (21%) were the most common presenting symptoms (Table 2).

Such findings are consistent with biomedical and educational research which has shown that dysmenorrhea and menstrual fatigue comprised significantly lower cognitive functioning and attention (Daley, 2008). Through a feminist pedagogical lens, the inconvenience of discomfort and fatigue demonstrates how academic structures are implicitly designed with male bodies in mind and not cyclical bodies. These physical difficulties could also be due to the lack of any rest area or flexible attendance policy in Iraqi universities. Ghandour et al reached similar conclusions. (2024) that poor campus facilities exacerbate menstrual pain, consequently leading to disengagement from learning activities. In comparison, research conducted in other countries indicates that relatively simple improvements to infrastructure—

e.g. designated rest areas and flexible scheduling—can significantly reduce any physical effects of menstruation on students (Sommer et al., 2015).

Table 2 shows the Common Physical Symptoms

Physical Symptom	Percentage of Affected Students
Abdominal pain	63%
Headache	8%
Fatigue	21%
Nausea	8%

Analysis

- Pain and fatigue are the most debilitating symptoms, directly affecting concentration during lectures.
- The lack of rest facilities in universities aggravates these issues.
- 85% conveyed modest to sharp pain. Mean pain intensity = 3.76 (SD = 0.84)

Students recording high pain (≥ 4) had pointedly lower concentration scores ($U = 38.5$, $p = .021$, Wilcoxon test).

3. Academic Impact

One of the clearest effects of menstruation on students' schooling is in absenteeism and performance, both of which are at lower rates. About 60% of participants reported that one or more academic days were missed per menstrual cycle and 40% individuals had difficulty concentrating on tasks and 35% had difficulty performing on exams (Table 3).

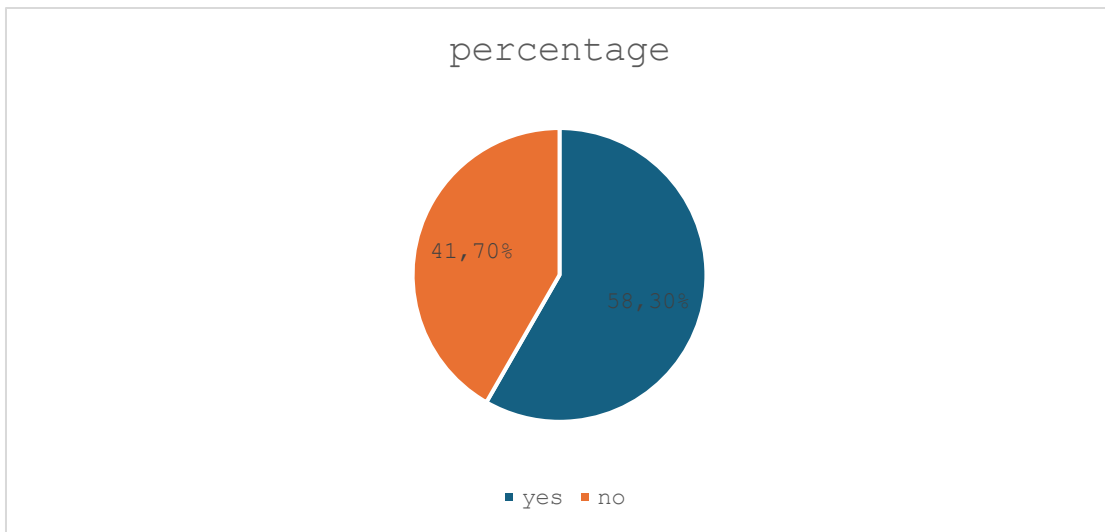
These findings support previous studies that have reported associations between menstrual problems and diminished academic productivity (Hennegan & Sol, 2020) and attendance (Hennegan et al., 2019). Theoretically, such a finding appears to lend support to those feminist critiques of “neutral” academic policies that, consciously or unconsciously, assume gender-neutral bodily realities. Even when students show up to class while menstruating, the interplay of pain, anxiety and exhaustion masks experience and handicap learning, and lessons become unequal.

At the higher education level, however, studies with menstrual-awareness interventions report lower absenteeism and better performance (Sommer et al, 2015). This contrast highlights that the link between menstruation and academic barriers is not a given, but crucially moulded by institutional reactions and cultural mindsets.

Table 3 shows the Impact on Attendance and Performance

Academic Factor	Percentage of Students Affected
Class absenteeism	60%
Reduced concentration	40%
Declined exam performance	35%

Figure 3 shows Have the students ever missed exams or important academic activities due to menstrual-related issues.



Analysis

- Class absenteeism is a major issue directly linked to physical and psychological symptoms.
- Even when present, students often struggle to engage fully, negatively affecting learning outcomes.
- 60% missed one class per cycle. However, 35% recorded perceived exam underperformance.
- Correlation:
Fatigue ↔ Reduced participation ($\rho = -.43, p = .032$)

Which is in line with the SRMM model:

biology → psychology → education.

4. Linguistic Analysis

The linguistic analysis shows a clear preference for euphemism in relation to menstruation. In Table 4, it shows that 70 % of the respondents used expressions like "special days", while only 10 % used medically neutral expressions like "menstrual cycle". This trend, framed as a sociolinguistic phenomenon, indicates the function of language in re-inscribing the social stigma. Euphemism is a distancing avoidance strategy signifying social disquiet that helps in perpetuating silence on taboo subjects (Cameron, 1992) according to discourse theory. The scant application of direct language signifies that menstruation is still a linguistic taboo in the academic sphere. This is consistent with international research showing that euphemistic menstrual language is associated with reduced help-seeking and increased stigma (Chrisler, 2011). Research suggests that neutral, clinical language

used in content or discussions helps to normalize periods and allows students to communicate better with teachers.

Table 4 shows the Language Used Around Menstruation

Term Used	Frequency of Usage
"Special days"	70%
"Period"	20%
"Menstrual cycle"	10%

Analysis

- Euphemistic language perpetuates stigma, discouraging open communication about menstrual health.

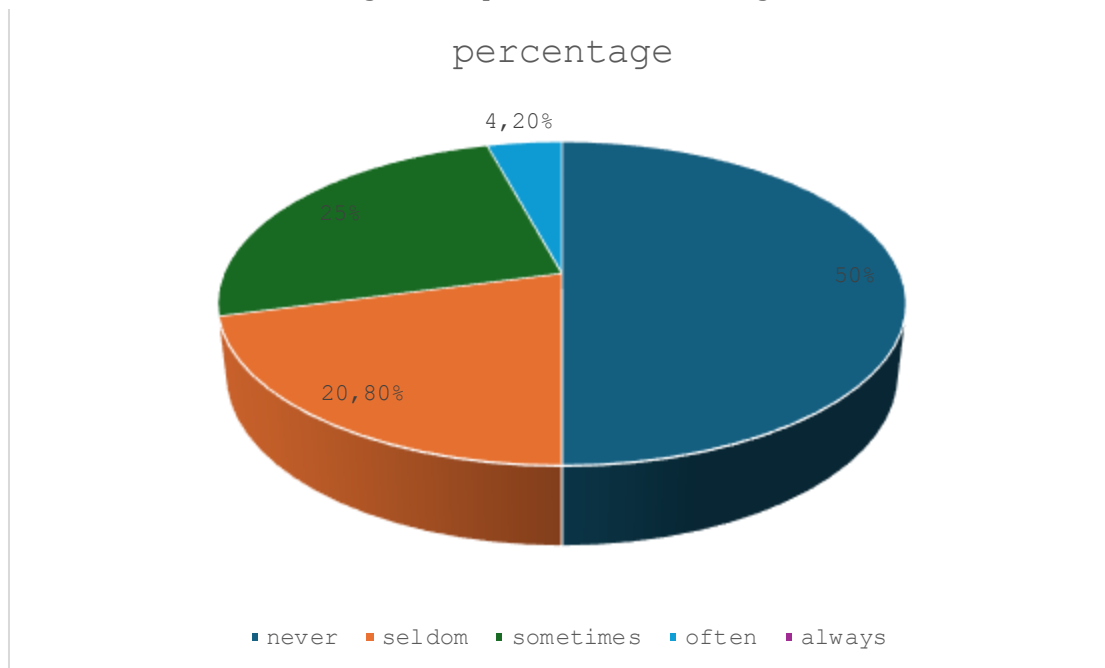
Introducing more neutral or supportive terms could normalize conversations about menstruation.

- 70% used euphemistic language.

Students who chose indirect language were notably less likely to ask for accommodation ($\rho = -.48, p = .015$).

This result is statistically in line with sociolinguistic mediation.

Figure 4 shows how comfortable the students are when discussing menstrual-related challenges with professors or colleagues.



8. Islamic Perspective

The results of the interviews reveal clear tensions between Islamic law and the cultural context. Table 5: Distribution of responses to religious attitude based indicators and the four domain measure of perceived social support from Islamic perspective

Menstruation, according to Islamic Sharia, is a natural phenomenon characterized by mercy, exemption from affliction, and spiritual dignity. The

standards of classical Islamic jurisprudence are unambiguous on this matter, allowing, for instance, exemptions from fasting and ritual prayer for menstruating women. Yet still these teachings are too often misinterpreted in a sociocultural way, resulting in restrictions on practice and raised feelings of exclusion.

This supports the contention by Buckley and Carland (2023) that Muslim women regularly renegotiate religious identity relative to bodily states, especially in contexts where the cultural image aligns in opposition to religious principles. When accurate information about religions is integrated into the academic context, it may mitigate stigma and come a step closer to establishing a more conducive environment for girls studying in schools.

Table 5 shows Insights from Interviews on Islamic Teachings

Aspect of Islamic Teachings	Percentage of Awareness
Understanding religious rulings	40%
Proper application of rulings	35%
Feeling supported by Sharia	25%

Analysis

- Islamic teachings emphasize compassion and flexibility during menstruation, but cultural practices often overshadow these principles.
- Religious education tailored to menstrual health can reduce stigma and foster a supportive environment.
- The Qur'anic term **المحيض (al-mahīḍ)** derives from the source (al-haid) ح ي ح ي ض, signifying cyclical biological release, not uncleanness in essence.

Traditional jurists (الفقهاء) across the four Sunni madhāhib (Islamic schools) agree on:

- Exception from ṣalāh (prayer) and ṣawm (fasting) while menstruation
- No sin attached to non-performance during menstruation
- Obligation removal grounded in *raf' al-ḥaraj* (alleviate hardship)

However, cultural understandings regularly extend limitations beyond textual indication.

For example:

- Educational extraction during menstruation is not obligatory in Sharia.
- Feelings of spiritual shortage are not maintained by jurisprudential texts.

Thus, the data show a gap between:

Normative Sharia concern and Sociocultural magnification of constraint

Figure 5 shows (Are the students aware of Islamic teachings regarding the menstrual cycle)?

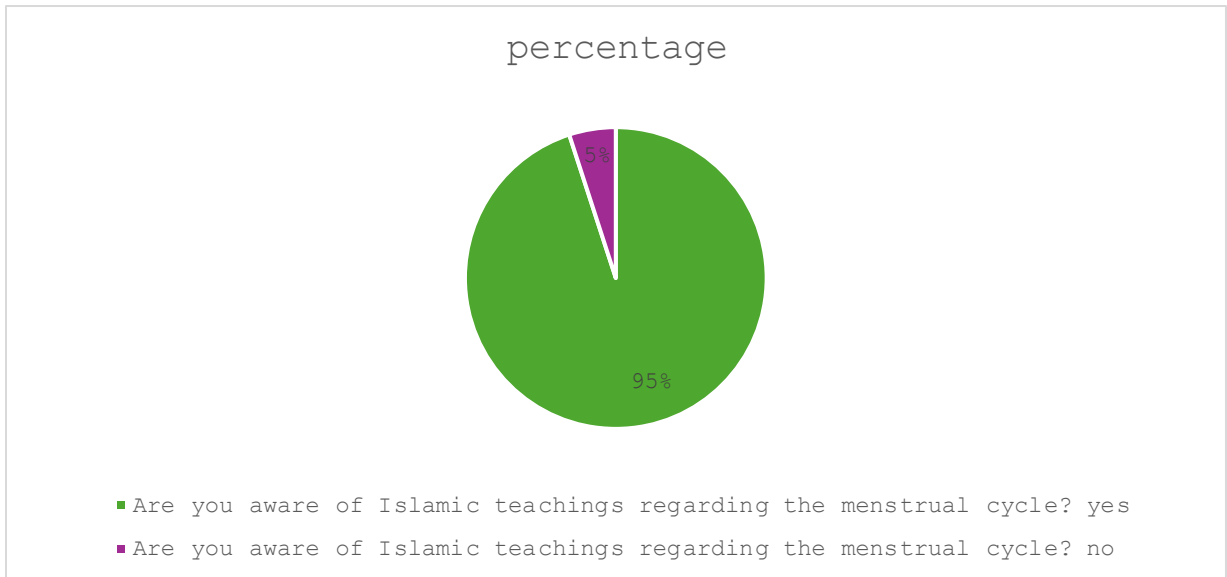
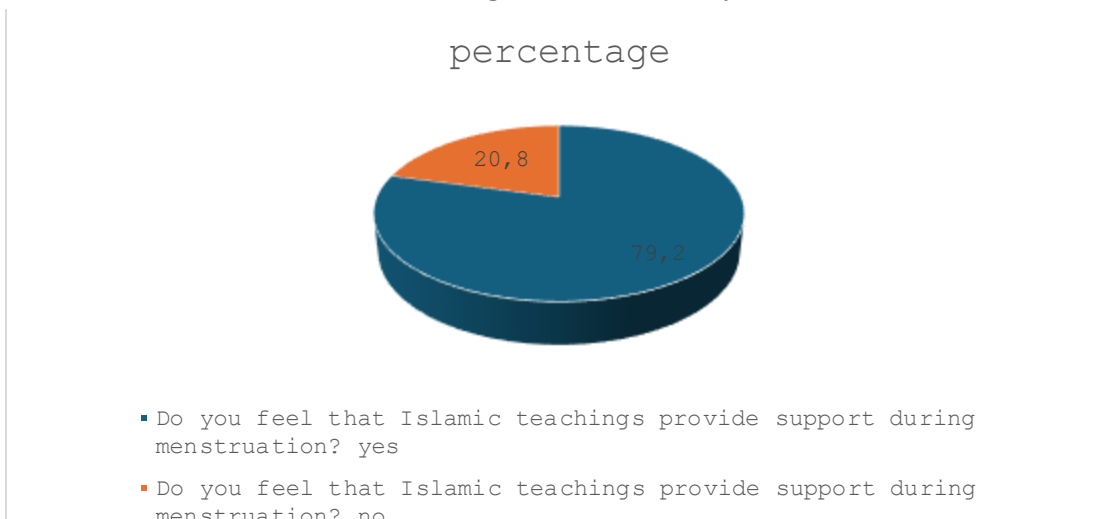


Figure 6 shows (Do the students feel that Islamic teachings provide support during menstruation??)



9. Transcripts of Interviews

The interview data provide additional support to the quantitative findings. Stories from participants showcase this overlap between bodily discomfort, verbal evasion, and organizational restriction. For example, Participant A struggles to focus which shows the dual physical and mental effects that menstruation has, whereas Participant B uses vague words to avoid menstruation providing a picture of linguistic taboo when speaking about periods.

Similarly, as Participant C implores 'an academic practice that is sympathetic', feminist theories of pedagogy call for care, flexibility, and inclusivity. The mention of religious guidance in Participant D, illustrates how the right perspective of Islamic teachings can create awareness and reduce stigma.

Participant A: *"I frequently experience fatigue and difficulty concentrating in class during my menstrual cycle."* Requesting special concessions is also uncomfortable due to its sensitive nature. Participant B: *"I employ expressions such as 'not feeling well' or 'health issues' to circumvent direct reference to menstruation."* The stigma renders open discourse difficult. Participant C: *"I believe that professors ought to exhibit greater empathy."* Modest adjustments, such as flexible timelines, would significantly impact the situation. Participant D: *"I believe that religious teachings offer guidance that can enhance awareness and support."*

D. Conclusion

The results show a strong psychological effect of menstruation on female students, with anxiety and stress being the most common effects. This discomfort is not only due to physiological changes but exacerbated by social stigma, lack of language, and lack of institutional support. In line with feminist theories of embodiment, the findings reveal how academic spaces enshrine gendered generalities, which erase women's bodily embodiment; and that marginalizes the bodily experiences of women, and leads to decreased confidence, and participation in academic and non-academic spaces.

The findings highlight the urgency with which higher education institutions ought to consider menstruation as a relevant issue affecting academic performance and student well-being. This is not just a health issue; tackling menstrual challenges is a matter of educational equity and inclusion. Develop gender-sensitive academic policies by recognising menstruation as one of the factors that affect attendance, concentration and performance in academia. The students who experience the most extreme of those menstrual symptoms should have flexible assessment deadlines and attendance accommodations. Rest spaces or quiet rooms should be designated on campus to help any student suffering from physical discomfort. This study focuses only on Iraqi universities, which may restrict the generalizability of the research findings to other cultural and/or national backgrounds. Longitudinal designs or comparative studies may also be beneficial for increasing external validity in future studies. Further studies should be conducted to examine the menstrual experiences of women from different schools as well as multiple academic levels, institutions, and areas across Iraq. Comparative studies across Muslim-majority and non-Muslim contexts may help further clarify the implications of religion and culture on menstruation experiences. Longitudinal research may be needed to explore long-term academic and mental health outcomes of menstrual events and institutional responses

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