



**INSTITUTIONEN FÖR SOCIOLOGI  
OCH ARBETSVETENSKAP**

# **MENSTRUAL DIRT**

**An exploration of contemporary menstrual hygiene practices in  
Sweden**

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### Abstract

*Menstrual Dirt* is a sociological study of how some aspects of menstruation come into being as dirty phenomenon, both in material and symbolic terms. Through engaging with a variety of empirical material Persdotter explores the everyday details of menstrual hygiene practices: how people roll their used pads, dispose their menstrual waste, wash their bloody genitals, change and clean their menstrual cups, clean toilets, and wash dirty clothes and carpets, and much more. With a theoretical basis in Mary Douglas' arguments surrounding dirt as symbolic pollution, Persdotter explores the symbolic underpinnings of menstrual pollution, while also exploring the materiality and sensoriality of menstrual dirt, as well as adding a focus on the personal and emotional consequences of dirt and pollution.

Persdotter employs primarily qualitative research methods, but the empirical material utilized in the study includes both in-depth interviews (12 interviewees) as well as survey data (445 respondents), and documents, commercials, online discussions, and *de-scription* of selected menstrual technologies.

The thesis focuses on two specific technologies: the disposable pad and the reusable cup. The results showcase how everyday practices and technologies take part in the (re)enactment of ideas of menstrual pollution as well as material, sensory and emotional experiences of menstrual dirt. The thesis elaborates on these processes in four analytical chapters. Two revolve around the pad and explore dirt and pollution in relation to wearing the pad, and in relation to disposing of a used pad. Two revolve around the cup and explore the cup as a dirty and/or polluted object in itself, and the practice of changing (exerting, emptying, reinserting) as a practice that can make other objects dirty.

Through using analytical tools from Science and Technology Studies, this thesis provides insights on the many heterogeneous actors and factors that take part in making menstruation into a matter of dirt and/or pollution. It explores technological, material and embodied aspects of that which critical menstruation scholarship often have regarded as merely social. This thesis adds to Critical Menstruation Studies also in shedding light on how pollution-beliefs, concealment imperatives and stigmatization of menstruation come into being in everyday practices. Through studying a Swedish context, it makes visible how a polluted status of menstruation can come into being in a Western society with a comparatively high level of gender equality and menstrual activism. Moreover, this research contributes to sociological explorations on dirt, and expands on the ways in which dirt can be utilized as an analytical tool, as well as facilitate greater understanding of the world around us, as well as exemplifying how exploring the seemingly trivial and inconsequential can make visible invisible how gendered inequalities are maintained and reaffirmed. Persdotter argues that exploring makings of menstrual pollution and dirt offers a sociological opportunity to make visible naturalized, routinized and trivialized practices and technologies in our everyday lives, and opening them up as more problematic, less given and more possible to change.

**Keywords:** sociology of dirt, critical menstruation studies, feminist science and technology studies, symbolic pollution, de-scription, waste, menstrual technologies, everyday technologies, menstrual cup, menstrual pad, hygiene technologies, menstrual hygiene practices, menstrual concealment imperatives, cleanliness, bathroom, kitchen, sensory experiences, embodiment, Sweden