

OPINION

Women, discriminations — How China's coronavirus health care workers exposed the taboo on menstruation

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Women make up more than half the doctors and 90 per cent of nurses battling the epidemic in Hubei, yet have been forced to forgo sanitary supplies as they were not deemed 'critical'. Thankfully, after an online outcry, this is changing

Overworked and exhausted, Chinese doctors and nurses fighting the coronavirus epidemic face a daunting task, caring for an increasing number of patients while risking infection due to a shortage of protective gear [1]. They avoid eating or drinking during their long shifts, and many wear diapers to minimise bathroom breaks so as to make the most of their precious masks, suits and goggles.

For women, there is the additional issue of periods. Due to a drastic lack of sanitary products, often their “urine and blood flow together” into the diaper, one doctor said in an interview.

In cold and rainy Wuhan, the centre of the outbreak, it is difficult to prepare enough dry and warm clothing, so during menstruation, some women have to skip underwear under their protective plastic coats, and work with visible blood stains.

As medical practitioners, they know all too well the harm of urinary tract infections [2], yet have no better options. In China, menstruation has long been a taboo topic, rarely discussed, leaving a major knowledge void in reproductive health.

A recent controversy highlighted this, and also provides a glimmer of hope for a much-needed change in attitudes.

In mid-February, China Central Television aired a story in which a young nurse was heard saying: “I’m having my period and have period pain, but have to take care of three patients who need my help.”. For the rebroadcast a few hours later, however, that bit was edited out. It quickly backfired as many netizens took issue with CCTV’s editing.

Social media users called out the state media for suggesting that a natural bodily function was inappropriate. “Is menstruation somehow salacious? Why avoid mentioning it?” a comment read. “If you don’t allow menstruation to be mentioned, stop encouraging women to have a second child then,” another one read, referring to the official promotion of two children per family, after abandoning the four-decade-long one-child policy in 2016 as the workforce shrank.

Another commentator asked: “Does anyone care about female health-care providers’ needs for sanitary pads and disposable underwear? Donations of these items have been rejected.”

Hubei province, of which Wuhan is the capital city, has essentially been locked down for a month. Public transport within the province and interprovincial logistics have basically stopped. Only delivery of medical essentials to hospitals gets priority permission, while deliveries of most other supplies face long delays.

What is more, male managers at Hubei hospitals reportedly refused to accept sanitary supplies for women when answering donation calls, as the items were not considered critical.

Meanwhile, female hospital employees are taking birth control pills to avoid periods due to the shortage of sanitary pads. "Women are overlooked in their workplace," said a Weibo user, "and their normal biological needs are stigmatised."

In this vicious circle, the veil of silence around menstruation contributes to sexism and gender inequality, holding women back. A 2015 survey found that almost 80 per cent of women in China thought menstruation put them at a disadvantage in society.

According to local media estimates, as of mid-February, there are more than 100,000 female medical professionals working in Hubei, accounting for half of the doctors and more than 90 per cent of the nurses. State media have repeatedly hailed their sacrifice as a positive inspiration in the hope that people will be moved by their heroism.

But burdening women with a disproportionate share of the sacrifice is unfair and counterproductive, as is the glorification of such sacrifice as habitual propaganda in a patriarchal system. Reports praising a heavily pregnant nurse still at work, and another who went back to work soon after suffering a miscarriage, have prompted a backlash online; people questioned whether it was respectful and even humane to allow the two to work.

Also, many found disturbing the television footage of female nurses weeping while their heads were shaved to "help prevent the spread of the disease", in what appeared to be coercion for propaganda purposes but which hospital management claim was completely voluntary.

These hot-button debates on the internet help to raise awareness of women's needs and rights, and have also attracted attention from men, some of whom admit to a lack of knowledge about menstruation because of the tacit taboo.

A satirical article titled, "In men's eyes, menstruation is blue, only lasts one day, and can be held back like urine" has been read more than 2 million times. Trending hashtags "#I too refuse to be ashamed of menstruation" and "#I am a woman and I have periods" have garnered over 1 million and 16 million views on Weibo respectively.

As calls for society to pay greater attention to women's needs grow, rights activists and volunteers are bringing about some impressive improvements. Women medical workers are openly talking about their specific needs, and sanitary towels are finally being treated as essential goods in Hubei.

Authorities and manufacturers have sent supplies of disposable underwear designed for periods as well as sanitary pads to hospitals, and have promised to continue doing so.

As reassuring as these first steps are, it is still too early to be optimistic. Transforming attitudes and practices demands a broad coalition of policymakers, professionals and advocates as well as ordinary men and women in China and beyond, during this crisis and afterwards.

In a post on a WeChat account registered by volunteers campaigning for the benefit of the female health-care givers, they said: "We expect, when this is over, that the natural bodily function of half of

our population will no longer be characterised as something ‘special’, and menstruation will no longer be shameful. We don’t need to bring it up every day, but we hope the days of the subject remaining taboo are numbered.”

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<https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3052524/how-chinas-coronavirus-health-care-workers-exposed-taboo>

Chinese state media ‘humiliating’ women nurses in coronavirus propaganda campaign

• Reports praising heavily pregnant nurse who continued to work and woman who went back to her job early after miscarriage prompt backlash online

• Academics say they are disrespectful and inappropriate, and could put pressure on others

Chinese state media reports heaping praise on women nurses for their sacrifices in the fight against the deadly coronavirus epidemic are backfiring online, with social media users and academics dismissing them as propaganda and “humiliating”.

State broadcaster CCTV led the charge last week, describing a nurse who was in her last month of pregnancy as “a great mother and angel in a white gown” because she had continued to work in the emergency ward of a military hospital in Wuhan, the epicentre of the outbreak in central China.

Zhao Yu was due to give birth in 20 days when the report aired, and apparently insisted she should remain on duty at the General Hospital of Central China War Zone, which like other hospitals in the city was overwhelmed with virus patients. Although her colleagues had tried to talk her out of it, she said she wanted to share the burden.

But the report hailing the nurse’s devotion to her job did not get the intended response online.

After many social media users raised concern about a heavily pregnant nurse working in a highly contagious and difficult environment, the video clip was withdrawn from CCTV’s website.

“I’m not touched at all – on the contrary, I’m angry,” read one of many similar comments on Weibo, China’s Twitter. “Shouldn’t a woman who’s nine months’ pregnant be at home? She’s in such thick protective clothes and it’s hard for her to even move around. Can that be good for her baby?”

The next day, a report in Wuhan Evening News told the story of another nurse who had returned to work just 10 days after she had surgery following a miscarriage.

It said Huang Shan, 27, who works at the Wuhan Central Hospital, should have rested for 28 days following the procedure, but she returned from sick leave much earlier because the outbreak was

worsening and her colleagues were struggling to cope with the crisis.

The nurse normally worked in oncology, but when she went back at the end of January she was assigned to the coronavirus isolation ward – something she kept from her family because she did not want to worry them. At first she felt exhausted by the work, but after a few days she adapted to the high-pressure work environment, according to the report, which met with a similar reaction online.

Hou Hongbin, a feminist writer in Guangzhou, said the reports were disrespectful and it was “inhumane” to let the two nurses keep working.

“Hospitals should not be allowing a nurse who is nine months’ pregnant – or the one who’d had a miscarriage – work. Their immune systems are weakened, and it’s highly possible that they will be infected with the virus themselves,” Hou said.

Her views were echoed by Huang Lin, a feminist researcher and professor at Capital Normal University in Beijing, who called the reports inappropriate.

“Even during an epidemic, medical staff need to protect themselves first,” she said.

The new coronavirus strain, which causes a disease known as Covid-19, has killed more than 2,100 people and infected over 74,000, mostly in China, since it began in December.

As the virus continued to spread earlier this month, and public anger over handling of the outbreak mounted, the internet was also abuzz with reports of women nurses having their heads shaved to help control the spread of the disease. Their hospitals said the women were “willing” to do this, but some nurses were seen in video footage weeping while their hair was cut off.

Hou said having nurses take such an extreme step was unnecessary.

“Medical workers in Wuhan, whether they’re male or female, don’t need to shave their heads, and the epidemic control guidelines issued by the health authorities have never said they should do this,” she said. “These reports are just propaganda, and they’re the result of bullying women nurses. They’re humiliating these nurses, but they present it as if they are making a sacrifice.”

Shen Yifei, an associate professor in sociology at Fudan University and director of its Family Study Centre in Shanghai, agreed. She said at first, several nurses had their hair cut very short and were seen in photos looking pleased on social media. Later, hospitals arranged for more women nurses to have their heads shaved in front of the cameras, and that was when the public sentiment turned, she said.

“It’s very apparent that the authorities have their own agenda here,” Shen said.

She said the reports about women nurses were misleading, and could put pressure on others.

“Medical workers should be praised for their performance at work, not anything to do with their female features,” she said.

There have also been reports of women working on the front line not having access to sanitary pads in hospitals, with some taking birth control pills to avoid having their periods.

“This is part of a bigger phenomenon, that women are overlooked in the workplace,” said feminist writer Hou. “Their normal biological needs are stigmatised.”

There was a slight improvement for women medical workers in Wuhan last week. After rights

activists called for their needs to be met, the authorities and manufacturers sent supplies of disposable underwear designed for periods to hospitals in the city, according to Hou.

Media expert Wei Wuhui, from Shanghai Jiao Tong University, said if the media on the mainland was independent and the nurses were being honest, there would be no problem. But since the stories had all come from media backed by the government, they were more about swaying public opinion.

“The authorities are hoping that people will be moved by these heroic deeds and will forget that this epidemic has partly been caused by officials’ malpractice,” he said.

Huang Lin, from Capital Normal University, said the media should also be looking at the why the epidemic happened.

“It’s all right for the media to report on ‘positive energy’ and praise medical staff, but it shouldn’t just be promoting the sacrifices made by a vulnerable group in society,” she said. “Many people will take this sacrifice and devotion for granted.”

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<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3051628/chinese-state-media-humiliating-women-nurses-coronavirus>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3047441/wuhan-medical-staff-being-infected-virus-much-faster-pace>

[2] <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/health-wellness/article/3034414/urinary-tract-infections-why-they-affect-more-women-and>