

# Everyday Tactics of Menstruating Commuters in Tokyo

Sakuko Sugawara

“When I compare myself to men, I think about how disadvantageous it is to have your period. A woman’s body changes so much during and after each period and because I experience mental fluctuations too, I think I am very disadvantaged,” Yuna tells me over a Zoom call.<sup>1</sup> She suffers from premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) and dysmenorrhea, and is one of the fifteen women I interviewed in 2022 as part of my research on how menstruation impacts train commuters in Tokyo.<sup>2</sup> As she chronicled her commute on rush-hour trains where she battled with lethargy and debilitating cramps every month, what became clear was that menstruation was not just a physical or biological issue but, as I will show in this essay, an infrastructural one.

<sup>1</sup> All respondents have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

<sup>2</sup> Although menstruation can be experienced by other demographics, my research is on cisgender women due to my positionality as a cisgender woman.

## **My Research Journey**

My research on how menstruation shapes the experience of travel in Tokyo emerged from a broader interest in exploring how infrastructures of transport enable commuters to move from one place to another while simultaneously reducing their physical mobility by containing them in a restrictive space. This concept – termed motility by Jörg Beckman (2005) – has been explored by urban scholars like Michel de Certeau (1984) and Nigel Thrift (2005). Yet, as suggested by how de Certeau (1984: v) dedicates his book to “the ordinary man,” the conversation has largely revolved around the mobility of cisgender, able-bodied men. There is limited scholarship that considers how transport infrastructure can impede physical mobility for those with different physiological functions and capabilities.

As someone who has suffered heavy and painful periods for a long time, what especially struck me was the continued absence of mainstream discussions on menstruation in urban planning. However, most women I knew talked about menstruation in relation to how it affected their mobility and access to public spaces. They spoke about how they have canceled plans to go out if it overlapped with their heavier days and complained about the struggle of finding places to sit down and rest without having to pay for a cup of coffee. Even the question, “Can you check?” – used to ask others to check for period stains – is always asked in relation to being in public when there is heightened anxiety and shame around staining and leaking. Why, then, I wondered, was menstruation not centered in thinking about urban infrastructure?

<sup>3</sup> Some exceptions are Kern 2020, Tuli et al. 2020, Lowe 2018 and Greed 2016.

Through my study, I found that this could be attributed to the perennial stigma surrounding conversations on women’s physiological functions. Some of my interlocutors were initially hesitant to speak about their menstrual struggles until I explained the purpose of my research. Others mentioned that they would never bring up menstruation to anyone outside of their close female social circle, to avoid causing embarrassment and discomfort. As a result of this perpetual silence encompassing public discussions on women’s bodily functions, I found that even spaces women use on an everyday basis, like the commuter railway infrastructure, fell short in catering to their menstrual needs.

## **Being Tactful**

One of my most memorable respondents was Akari who, in an animated tone, recalled her struggle commuting to high school. Although she laughed as she spoke, she revealed an especially distressing experience where she was unable to locate a restroom while suffering from severe cramps. “I cried, I just cried. Inevitably, I had to embark on the train again and I rode to the next station before alighting again,” she said. When asked about the role of priority seating, which can potentially provide a certain degree of comfort to commuters experiencing strong cramps, she replied: “It’s difficult to see that I am suffering extreme pain so if I sit in a priority seat, people will think ‘Why is this young jerk sitting there?’” Thus, for people like Akari, public restrooms and priority seating played a minimal and insufficient role in alleviating the burden of menstruating in public.



Furthermore, women-only compartments, which I assumed at the outset of my research would assuage the anxiety of menstruation, featured least in my conversations. The limited timeframe in which these operate (usually during the morning rush hour) and their inconvenient location at the rear of trains deterred respondents from seeking gender-based affinity, despite the possibility that they would have more understanding fellow travelers if they experienced any period-related incidents.

*Sign for priority seating taken at Futakotamagawa Station.*

Photo: Sakuko Sugawara, 2022.

Where my respondents felt that the commuter railway infrastructure did not meet their menstrual needs, they devised their own tactics. Knowing that menstrual products are not easily accessible, many respondents carried around extra tampons, sanitary towels and painkillers, preemptively imagining a situation where they are away from home and on the move. They also attempted to cope with their struggles by internalizing the message that periods are a normal occurrence and something that must be endured. As Chihiro described it: “I think it’s something to endure, so I don’t ask for people to be [especially] considerate. Because I think that it’s normal. Maybe that’s not very good.” Moreover, frequent negative encounters during menstruation helped the women prepare for similar future events by remembering at what point the train usually clears out and memorizing the locations of public restrooms and stores where one can purchase menstrual products. Hence, they pieced together embodied experiences to view their environment as a complex set of possibilities and paucities.

Menstruation can seem mundane, as people are taught from an early age to manage it in privacy, eventually learning how to cope. Yet not everyone possesses equal capacity

simply to keep it as part of their daily routine when it poses an obstacle to their activities. When menstruation occurs in unexpected ways – whether it be through leakage or experiencing severe pain – it threatens to spill out of the private realm, where it has been safely kept secret, and into the public realm, where it is often subject to stigma and misinformation. The stain, the pain and the physical discomfort make the boundary between public and private not just porous but downright leaky.

### 'Just' a Period

Being prone to severe menstrual cramps and having vasovagal syncope, a chronic condition that causes fainting triggered by pain, meant that I often collapsed inside trains packed with businessmen, amidst a sea of unfamiliar male faces. Even though I was surrounded by many people, my mind would already be thinking ahead about how I was going to deal with this on my own. I would try frantically to recall what the platform at the next station looked like, where the benches were located and whether there were any restrooms nearby. In these instances, there was always a voice in my head that mocked my self-pity, reminding me that no one would help because it was 'just' a period. When I saw women in high heels standing in the train during their commute, never did it cross my mind that they too dismissed their own struggles as being just a period, enduring the journey to their office every day.



*Public restrooms at Futakotamagawa Station.*  
Photo: Sakuko Sugawara, 2022.

As I concluded my interviews, many respondents told me that they had never been given the opportunity to speak so openly about their struggles with periods or to question exactly why the surrounding infrastructure seemed so hostile to their needs. As Akari remarked towards the end of her interview: "I mentioned earlier that I wouldn't ask for help when I am experiencing menstrual pain and I assume that other people

would say the same, but it would be ideal if there was an environment where people could seek help.”

Although Yuna felt that menstruation was a significant disadvantage for women, my study reveals that this disadvantage is in part due to rectifiable factors pertaining to the lack of attention to and aid for menstruating commuters. While menstruation will always entail physical discomfort, the feelings of isolation and shame may be alleviated if we could see clear efforts to improve our infrastructure. This would include public restrooms with fully functioning, well-stocked menstrual product dispensers and priority seating that takes into consideration less visible impediments, as well as – on a more macro level – calls to actively combat gendered exclusions. Creating feminist cities requires that we think beyond the mere numerical inclusion of women in public life; it means making possible conditions that foster mobility and belonging. One way to do this is by accounting for the lived experience of menstruation and anticipating the needs of people like Yuna, Akari and the scores of others who have learned to quietly cope with period pain, discomfort and the attendant experience of inequality.

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**Sakuko Sugawara** is an independent researcher, interested in the interdisciplinary fields of gender and mobility studies. Upon spending her final year researching the relation between menstruation and commuting in Tokyo, she has graduated from Yale-NUS College with a Bachelor's degree in urban studies. Her research interests have been shaped by her own experiences navigating the city as a woman. She believes that it is imperative to deconstruct the assumption that the imagined users of the city are cisgender, able-bodied men and to take into consideration how certain other populations may experience the urban environment differently. Sakuko plans to continue her research on gendered exclusions in the built environment during her postgraduate studies.

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