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“Nothing to Be Alarmed About”: Medical Perceptions of Female Pain

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Abstract

This paper explores the cultural construction and medical reception of female pain through the case of endometriosis in predominantly Western clinical settings. Situated within a critical feminist cultural studies framework, the presentation traces the historical and contemporary discourses that shape how endometriosis and women’s suffering are understood — from ancient narratives of “hysteria” to present-day clinical encounters in which pain is minimised, psychologised, or dismissed as exaggerated. Drawing on digital ethnography of 40 personal narratives by people living with endometriosis, the study identifies three dominant repertoires through which women’s pain is framed and managed: as dramatised pain, as an expression of mental illness, and through entrenched notions of “female deficit.” These patterns are not only symptomatic of enduring gendered biases in medical knowledge and practice but also operate as forms of patriarchal medical violence that discipline women’s bodies and devalue their lived experiences. The paper contends that such medical perceptions do more than misinterpret pain — they actively reproduce structures that marginalise women’s suffering and reaffirm unwanted sexual and reproductive roles. The analysis calls for a reconceptualisation of clinical epistemologies of pain that centres gendered experience and challenges entrenched biases in healthcare.

Keywords: patriarchal medical violence, Slovenia, digital ethnography, endometriosis, healthcare