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Conquering Myth and Misconception : Strategies in Normalizing Menstruation

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Abstract

The beginning of menstruation marks a new chapter in a woman's life. It initiates her into the socially constructed idea of "womanhood" which corresponds to her ability to give birth and nurture. It also signifies her eligibility to seek a conjugal life. Lack of menstruation renders a woman barren, thus making her ineligible to seek a conjugal life as per societal conventions. Despite the celebration of the girl's initiation to womanhood, the first period is marked by practices of seclusion of the girl along with many prohibitions on her access to spaces as well as food. Such restrictions are based on the conception of a menstruant being impure and dangerous, with the impurity being especially significant during the first three days of her periods. Stigmatising adolescent girls and women through misguided beliefs and age old cultural practices, contributes to gender inequity and undermines their basic rights. For menstruating women and girls around the world, a focus on sanitation and hygiene is an effective way to link one vital narrative to sustain another: Women's rights. Unfortunately, the myth and misconceptions surrounding menstruation in society prevents girls and women from articulating their needs. The problems of poor menstrual hygiene management have been ignored or misunderstood in terms of understanding what menstruation is, and how simple management interventions along with positive attitudes can shun away myth and normalize menstruation and make a lasting difference to the lives of every adolescent girl and woman. The current paper aims to discuss menstruation related misconceptions prevalent in India, their impact on women's life, relevance of addressing these issues and a brief description about various strategies to combat them.

Key Words: Adolescent, Hygiene, Inequity, Menstruation, Misconception, Reproductive Health, Sanitation, Strategies

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Introduction

“Menstrual blood is the only source of blood that is not traumatically induced. Yet in modern society, this is the most hidden blood, the one so rarely spoken of and almost never seen, except privately by women...”

(Grahn, 1993, p. xviii).

In a woman’s life, the metamorphosis from a girl to a lady has to pass through various changes and of course, via the passage of menstruation which, from the start to cessation plays a pivotal role. Periods manifest the probability of fecundity in a woman and attribute the succession of the human race in a panoramic view. From the medical perspective, menstruation refers to the periodic discharge of blood from the uterus of a non-pregnant woman which generally occurs at an average gap of 28 days. It is also referred to as “menses” or “menorrhoea”. The term “menses” is derived from the Latin word *mensis*, meaning “month,” this is again related to the Greek word *menis* that translates to “moon” (Allen, 2007). This cultural association of menstruation to the moon is established because the menstrual cycles in women closely correlates to the 29.5 days that the moon takes to rotate the earth. Reese and Barbieri (2010) state that menstruation is a process which stays for almost 40 years in a woman’s life. It starts with menarche, the average age for which is 13 years and continues until menopause that occurs around at around 52 years of age.

Although it is essential for the procreation of progeny, it has always been under wraps – under the sheet of taboos, myths and restrictions. Religious and cultural beliefs of people have since long stigmatized “menstrual blood” as something impure, evil, and contaminating. The stigmas and prohibitions surrounding the periodic menstrual discharge of women is prevalent across societies. Such notions about ‘natural’ biological function has led to the discrimination and isolation of women from social and religious gatherings and forced them in the confines of their homes.

Misconceptions related to menstruation in India

There are widespread misconceptions and stigma attached to menstruation in India where women are considered “ritually and ceremonially impure” during their monthly process and are denied entry into temples and other religious events. One of the most rampant misconceptions in India is the notion of impurity attached with the natural female body process of Menstruation. While it is not to say that all of India is stuck with this misconception, it is safe to say that most of us still feel that covering sanitary napkins in newspapers and black polythene is the decent way to go about it! It is unfortunate that a large number of adolescent girls and women are still weighed down by unfounded taboos that surround menarche and the subsequent management of the menstrual cycle. The changes that accompany the onset of puberty- both psychological and physical – are significant for any young girl making the transition into womanhood. A study by Koff et.al indicated that the girls view menarche as an intense and negative event, which is marked by a change in their relations with family and

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peers, increased self-consciousness and feelings of embarrassment, shame and self-apprehension (Koff, Rierdan, & Jacobson, 1981). However if these changes are accompanied by social stigma, the effects can be significantly detrimental on their young impressionable minds- as well as their overall health.

Besides, in traditional societies, girls are often not educated properly regarding the necessity and purpose of menstruation. Instead, they are told that it is something impure which needs to be hidden and not discussed with others. “Sexuality, proclaimed or concealed, exposed or repressed, is disturbing. That this feeling of uneasiness should flower forth as shame is also explained by the fact the sexualisation of the body is described in terms of filth and pollution.” (Woerkens, 1990, p. WS11). Such cultural conception about menstruation being associated with shame deeply embeds a sense of inferiority amongst girls about their bodies. Woerkens further states that “The sense of shame induces a certain way of being, a particular behavior, which girls begin to learn at the moment of puberty. It is also a coded and transformed form of the particular anxieties of their mother at that moment” (Woerkens, 1990, p. WS 11) . Such notions about menstruation being something impure and shameful are thus internalized by the girls and this continues through generations. The taboo around menstruation exists in many societies across the world. Such taboos are visible in everyday life of women in the form of various purity and pollution customs she is subjected to throughout her life. Therefore, women are held perennially impure and hold a subordinate position to men when it comes to their participation in rituals. This is exemplified in the debarment of women from entering certain religious places of worship which can be cited with the example of Sabarimala temple¹ of Kerala, where women within the menstrual age of 10-50 are denied entry near the sanctorum of the temple. Similarly, such traditions exist in Assam as well where women are still denied entry to few *satras* (Vaisnab monasteries). “It was in the name of the traditional Hindu laws that no women were allowed to participate in socio-religious affairs and enter the *manikut* (sanctum-sanctorum) which was the normal procedure followed by all principal *satras* in the Majuli Island. In outside Majuli, Barpeta *satra* of Barpeta district still does not allow women to enter its *kirtanghar* (Prayer hall)” (Kalita, 2017, p. 120). Menstruating women across many cultures are often separated from her family and an array of restrictions are imposed on her that relate to her food, access to places, household work, or contact with the opposite sex. “ Restrictions on, and avoidance of the menstruating woman vary greatly in intensity cross-culturally, ranging from informal regulations regarding personal hygiene or proscriptions on sexual intercourse to the establishment of special menstrual huts, where a woman lives in complete seclusion from society until menstruation has subsided. There may be taboos on cooking for others, or touching others’ dishes, clothing, or personal articles.” (Montgomery, 1974, p.140)

If we take into consideration the menstrual practices amongst the Assamese Hindus, we see that “menstrual blood” is signified to be something that is impure and unholy

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and there is a certain aura of discomfort associated with its utterance (taboo). However, the irony here again is that despite the negative connotations and beliefs associated with menstruation, it is again signified as something that is ‘expected’ in women. In the Assamese society menstruation is celebrated in the form of a symbolic marriage ritual called *tuloni biya*, which indicates that a girl has been initiated into womanhood. A girl who has not bled in the expected age is a thing of concern for the society as it denotes barrenness which is looked down upon by people. A barren woman is often ridiculed and considered as ‘cursed’ due to her inability to conceive and thereby thought of through the frame of a *lack* -her womanhood thereby rendered incomplete. Hence, we see a strict dichotomy of meanings associated with “menstrual blood” that ranges from positive to the negative.

Impact of misconceptions related to menstruation on women’s life

Menstruation is still a taboo in India and it is common for people across society to feel uncomfortable about the subject. Coupled with it, is the fact that there is lack of information on the process of menstruation, and proper requirements for managing menstruation. In Assamese society, the girl often has to completely abstain from food and in some cases water, in the first day immediately after her menarche; she is also strictly confined inside a dark room with no physical contact with the male members of the family for three to four days. Such practices are prone to affect the young girls by igniting fear and anxiety. The misconceptions surrounding this issue in the society prevents girls and women from articulating their needs and the problems of poor menstrual hygiene management have been largely ignored or misunderstood. Good menstrual hygiene is crucial for the health, education, and dignity of girls and women.

The notion of a woman being impure is not just limited to the days of her menses, but forms a permanent basis in most of the religious rites and ceremonies .Religion plays a very prominent role in the lives of people in the sense that individuals are afraid to disobey and defy the rules prescribed by their faith. There is always a fear in the minds of individuals that if they act against religious beliefs, they will be cursed and punished by god. Because of the fear of such consequences, women have continued such traditions since ages without any objection or defiance. Gradually, such patriarchal conceptions regarding menstruation have been internalized by the women in the name of traditions. Since they don’t want their future and marital life to be affected, they obediently follow such practices and pass on the same to their daughters. Thus, this cycle of fear and submissiveness of women to such patriarchal traditions have continued, even though the original enforcers of these traditions no longer exist. Instead, now the women enforce such practices on their daughters and fellow women. The terminology used to describe this form of self-inflicted discrimination is “internalized sexism”, which involves women enacting learnt sexist behavior upon themselves and other women (Bearmen, Korobov, & Thorne, 2009). Also termed as “internalized oppression” or “internalized misogyny”, it refers to oppressive practices that continue to persist even when

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the oppressor group is no longer present (Allport, 1954; Freire, 1970). Thus, it can be held that the continuation of discriminatory menstrual practices by women is nothing but the manifestations of internalized oppression amongst themselves. There is a need to change family and community norms and beliefs in this regard. Not being able to talk about their experience and having limited information means that menstruation becomes something to be ashamed of and to hide, and is consequently ignored in families, schools and communities. The silver lining is that awareness is on the rise, and society is becoming increasingly conscious of the need to empower women by emancipating them from unscientific beliefs about menstruation. To ensure that adolescent girls and women have the necessary support and facilities, it is important that the wider society, communities and families must challenge the status quo and break the silence around menstruation.

To be able to dispel misconceptions, society must first identify them as such and address these issues. Several socio – religious restrictions still hold sway, like a restriction on menstruating women attending religious functions or touching items of worship. Surprisingly, many women themselves don’t want to enter, as culture and tradition is so imbibed in them. The justification that can be found is that the ‘purity’ of the temple needs to be kept which might be ‘polluted’ by menstruating women who are considered ‘unclean’. Menstrual norms which very conveniently portrays the myth of the ‘polluted’ body with a list of rituals to follow is an important way of manifestation of power dynamics is also an important site of the subjugation of the female body which is in a way controlled by such norms. As a result, knowledge about menstruation and hygienic habits during this time are essential for adolescent girls. This knowledge will not only give the young girls the confidence to talk freely about the subject without getting embarrassed, but also help them to ably manage it. Such misconceptions about menstruation present in many societies impact on girls’ and women’s emotional state, mentality and lifestyle and most importantly health.

Strategies to combat misconceptions and normalize menstruation

The first and foremost strategy in this regard is raising the awareness among the adolescent girls related to menstrual health and hygiene. Young girls often grow up with limited knowledge of menstruation because their mothers shy away from discussing the issues with them. Adult women may themselves not be aware of the biological facts or good hygienic practices, instead passing on cultural taboos and restrictions to be observed. It is very important for parents and educational institutions to inculcate knowledge about reproduction and menstruation openly to adolescents without any bias. The superstitions around menstruation can be gradually eradicated only by sharing practical knowledge about the process from a scientific and medical standpoint. This will ensure that young girls are not traumatized or face anxiety and embarrassment after their menarche. It is also important that children do not grow up with negative perceptions about menstruation that are based on the cultural belief of menstruation being a polluting process. The change in the perceptions of the

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emerging generation can play a vital role in abolition of such superstitious practices and misconceptions around menstruation. Community based health education campaigns could prove worthwhile in achieving this task. Empowerment of women through education and increasing their role in decision making can also aid in this regard Provision of sanitary napkins and adequate facilities for sanitation and washing should be made available with the gender perspective. Lack and Unapproachable plight of Public Toilets cause of concern for women even in cities like Guwahati. Adolescent friendly health services clinics must also have trained manpower to address these issues. Primary care physicians are the first point of contact for diagnosis of common menstrual problems and other associated reproductive morbidities among the populations in their community. Many of the practices during menstruation have direct implications on reproductive health. For instance, not bathing during menstruation can lead to compromise in hygiene of the girl and thus lead to the reproductive tract infections.

Conclusion

The myths and misconceptions related to menstruation have been still prevalent in India. Due to these, several health related problems occur among women. Apart from these psychological problems also are created which eventually effect conjugal/family lives. A primary care physician is thus, required to be acquainted with common myths related to menstruation prevalent in his/her community and treat the individual holistically by addressing them also. Else, the problem may be treated for a while but it would continue to recur with increasing severity. Low cost sanitary napkins can be locally made and distributed particularly in rural and slum areas as these are the areas where access to the product is difficult (Kumar A, Srivastava , 2011, P 594-604) . Government of India has approved a scheme to improve menstrual hygiene for 1.5 Crore adolescent girls by distributing low cost sanitary napkins in rural areas under the National Rural Health Mission since 2010. On the occasion of Women's Day 8th March 2018, Government launches Rs 2.5 low cost sanitary napkins³³ This statement has been taken from <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2018/india/govt-launches-rs-2.5-low-cost-sanitary-napkins.html>

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