
MENSTRUAL HYGIENE PRACTICES: MYTHS AND TABOO

Dr. Avani Maniar*

Dr. Shivani Mehta**

Abstract

Menstrual cycle is an integral part of a female's life which due to the superstitions and myths followed by the families and others in the community, gets dangerously ignored and is not given importance. In rural areas, women still follow rituals which are harmful to their own health and hygiene. In the places where women are not the part of decision-making process in the family, they do not have any say in birth spacing; menstrual hygiene awareness becomes most sensitive and significant for them. Instead of providing proper rest and nutrition to their body, the treatment the women get and do to themselves makes their body prone to harmful diseases and infections. The government has provided various facilities to increase the level of awareness in the rural areas through strengthening Anganwadis and ANM workers. However, the awareness level has not changed much, to which there is an increase in the maternal health and menstrual health related issues. This paper revolves around the situation myths and taboo of women residing in Mopti Khavdi Village of Jamanagar, Gujarat. According to Census 2011 information the location code or village code of Moti Khavdi village is 513600. Moti Khavdi village is located in Jamnagar Tehsil of Jamnagar district in Gujarat, India. It is situated 27km away from Jamnagar, which is both district & sub-district headquarter of Moti Khavdi village. As per 2009 stats, Moti Khavdi village is also a gram panchayat. The total geographical area of village is 1516.39 hectares. Moti Khavdi has a total population of 5,928 peoples. There are about 1,104 houses in the village.

Keywords:

Adolescent girls, women,
menstrual hygiene,
menstrual practices

* Associate Professor

** Temporary Assistant Professor,

Department of Extension and Communication, Faculty of Family and Community Sciences, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara

Adolescents belong to vital age group not only because they are the entrant population to parenthood but also because they are threshold between childhood and adulthood. As they attempt to cross this threshold, they face various physiological, psychological, and developmental changes. The word “Adolescent” is derived from the Latin word “adolescere” which means to grow to maturity that indicates the defining features of adolescence. Menstruation is the first indication of puberty. During puberty, the physical changes occur which transform the body of child into that of an adult, changes in body size, and changes in body proportions. A menstrual taboo is any social taboo concerned with menstruation. In some societies, it involves menstruation being perceived as unclean or embarrassing, extending even to the mention of menstruation both in public (in the media and advertising) and in private (among the friends, in the household, and with men). Many traditional religions consider menstruation ritually unclean. Most of the girls receive their gynaecological information from their mothers, religious books, older sister, or a peer. However, such information was generally given after menarche rather than before. Hence, there is a need to provide healthy family life education to the woman particularly the adolescent girls (AGs)

Menstruation is a normal physiological process indicating beginning of reproductive life but sometimes it is considered as unclean phenomenon in the Indian society. Insufficient, incorrect information regarding menstruation is often a cause of unnecessary restrictions in the daily normal activities of the menstruating girls creating various psychological issues. Besides, the lack of knowledge and awareness also lead to some poor personal hygienic practices during menstruation leading to many reproductive tract infections.

Menstrual hygiene depends upon the educational, socioeconomic, and cultural statuses of family. School curriculum also has some role in menstrual health.

Poor menstrual hygiene causes great impact in increased vulnerability to reproductive tract infections (RTI). Currently millions of women sufferers from RTI and infection is transmitted to the offspring. Women having knowledge regarding menstrual hygiene are less vulnerable to RTI and its consequences.

Status in India

In India, menstruation is considered a natural event, a gift from the God, and is considered necessary as it gives womanhood. Here, women's perceptions of menstruation vary among different cultures and religions. There are many taboos like menstruating girl is prevented from going to temple, to cook food, to attend weddings, etc. There is limited knowledge and many misconceptions about menstruation among young women in India before and even after the menarche. This usually leads to undue fear, anxiety, and undesirable practices. The knowledge and practices related to menstruation are dependent on socio economic conditions as well.

Today, the number of women who have regular menstruation periods is increasing in developing countries including India due to later childbearing and fewer children. But many lack the economic and social conditions to manage menstruation sanitation satisfactorily. A particularly vulnerable group in this aspect is young women in poor families. Furthermore, understanding young women's knowledge and practices related to menstruation is a central element for designing appropriate education programs

Menstruation is still regarded as something unclean or dirty in Indian society. The reaction to menstruation depends on awareness and knowledge about the subject. The manner in which a girl learns about menstruation and its associated changes may have an impact on her response to the event of menarche. Although menstruation is a natural process, it is linked with several misconceptions and practices, which sometimes result into adverse health outcomes. Isolation of the menstruating girls and restrictions being imposed on them in the family, have reinforced a negative attitude toward this phenomenon. Menstrual practices are clouded by taboos and social cultural restrictions even today, resulting in AGs remaining ignorant of the scientific facts and hygienic health practices, necessary for maintaining positive reproductive health. Women having better knowledge regarding menstrual hygiene and safe practices are less vulnerable to reproductive tract infections and its consequences. Therefore, increased knowledge about menstruation right from childhood may escalate safe practices and may help in

mitigating the suffering of millions of women. The social stigma attached to menstruation causes many girls and women to carry out dangerous hygiene practices. Lacking a platform to share menstrual hygiene problems, girls and women often suffer from discomfort and infection, avoiding urination during menstruation, and using any kind of cloth available old (or) unwashed as an, but still girls are not visiting medical practitioners. Menstruation is a landmark feature of female puberty and signals reproductive maturity. Anxiety, fear, confusion, and even depression are frequently reported experiences of menarche. While the anatomy of the genital tract and physiology of menstruation are taught in some of the schools and colleges, the practical management of menstruation has often been regarded as inappropriate for public discussion. Myths, superstitious beliefs, and cultural taboos substitute appropriate information in the adolescent. Menstrual education is a vital aspect of health education. It is known that attitudes to menstruation and menstrual practices developed at menarche may persist throughout life. The study of the menstrual practices of adolescent girls unveils health issues that affect their adjustment to reproductive life and provides the basis for formulating health education strategies relevant for this crucial period in reproductive life.

Knowledge and Practices Followed By Women's In Rural Areas

Of all the developmental milestones associated with the adolescent years, menarche may be the most noteworthy. The onset of the first menstrual period is a qualitative event of major significance in a woman's life, denoting the achievement of a major functional state. The bodily changes associated with puberty affect a girl's psychological and social development and the girl's life experiences influence the physical changes that are occurring as well. The feelings of fright and embarrassment that girls experience at menarche need to be acknowledged and the negative aspects of the menstrual experience need to be discussed in order to provide a balanced view of menstruation. Cultural taboos about menstruation also need to be addressed. Until relatively recently, separation of menstruating women from the rest of the population was common, and it is still practiced in some areas

of the world. Beliefs or superstitions about dangers inherent in menstruation and the rituals that accompany them, are extremely common and widespread. This study will make an attempt to explore the beliefs and practices of adolescent girls of the rural areas towards menstruation. In India, menstruation is considered a polluting factor. In many places menstruating girls and women are considered untouchable. Even where strict untouchability is not observed, girls learn from early adolescence that during their monthly cycle they may not touch anything in the kitchen or visit a holy place. As an additional example, it is commonly believed that pickles made by a menstruating girl will rot. This lack of factual information, compounded by the prevalence of myths, means that girls' practical needs related to managing menstruation are often not appreciated or appropriately addressed. Most girls are left to cope as best they can with rags or other insufficient protection.

A survey of knowledge, attitudes and beliefs towards menstruation was made in 22 schools in Anand district, Gujarat, India. Of 900 schoolgirls aged 11-17 years, only 38.5% felt comfortable about menarche and only 31.0% believed that menstruation was a normal physiological process. 37.2% had not been informed about menarche before its onset and 48.2% felt they were not mentally prepared. In this area of India, many families continue the custom of celebrating the first menarche and observing social restrictions.

Adolescence is a significant period in the life of a woman. Adolescent girls often lack knowledge regarding reproductive health including menstruation which can be due to socio-cultural barriers in which they grow up. These differences create various problems for the adolescent girls. The need of the hour for girls is to have the information, education and an enabling environment to cope with menstruation issues. The hygiene-related practices of girls in the adolescent period related to menstaboos and myths existing in our traditional society which has a negative implication for women's health, particularly their menstrual hygiene. Studies have shown that the girls lack knowledge about menstruation and due to lack of hygiene, they are likely to suffer from RTI's. Attitude of parents and society in discussing the related issues are barriers to the right kind of information, especially in the rural

areas. Menstruation is thus considered to be a matter of embarrassment in most cultures. It was therefore decided to conduct a study to explore the level of knowledge and practices regarding menstrual hygiene among the adolescent girls. Frustration can have an effect on their health.

The purpose of the study was to assess the cultural beliefs and practices regarding menstruation among adolescent girls and women of the rural areas in Jamnagar Gujarat which will help us in understanding the socio cultural taboos and restrictions still practiced by ignorant families. The findings of the study will reinforce the need to encourage safe and hygienic practices among the adolescent girls and bring them out of traditional beliefs, misconceptions and restrictions regarding menstruation.

Objective of the Study:

Broad Objective:

To study on hygiene practices and belief regarding menstruation amongst women and girls of Moti Khawdi Village, Jamnagar

Specific Objectives:

- To study on hygiene practices followed during menstruation by women and girls of Moti Khawdi Village, Jamnagar
- To study the beliefs related to menstruation amongst women and girls of Moti Khawdi Village, Jamnagar

Justification Selected Components

- In village and rural areas women and girls are not aware of how to destroy the used pads.
- They usually throw it with the garbage and girls and due to this more often cows, dogs and other animals tend to eat those pads.
- Some women's who are financially weak reuse that pads

The issue of menstrual hygiene is inadequately acknowledged and has not received proper attention. Use of sanitary pads and washing the genital area are essential practices to keep the menstrual hygiene. Unhygienic menstrual practices can affect the health of the girls and there is an increased vulnerability to reproductive tract infections and pelvic inflammatory diseases and other complications. Therefore, the objective of this study was to assess the knowledge and practice of menstrual hygiene amongst women and girls of Moti Khavadi village (Jamanagar)

Methodology:

Selection of Topic

To study hygiene practices and belief regarding menstruation amongst women and girls of Moti Khavadi village (Jamanagar)

Sample and Sample Size

60 Women (30 women's and 30 girls) were selected as sample from Moti Khavadi village (Jamanagar)

Major Findings:

- Women don't maintain any hygiene while menstruating; they use dirty and unwashed clothes repeatedly.
- They are not allowed to go to the kitchen and sleep in the same bed with her husband because they are thought to be dirty and impure while having periods. The women are not allowed to visit temples and other social areas.
- They are not allowed to tend to the cattle, people believe that if the women in her periods touch the cow or the goat, they become infertile.
- The pregnant women don't allow any women or girl to touch her in their periods just because they think that in that case the child will die or the menstruating women can create the problem in her pregnancy.

- People treat a woman during her periods as untouchable. The women are sent to the field areas to do the agricultural work, but not allowed to work at home.
- School going girls use cloth, and during their periods they usually stay back at home because of weakness and dullness. Also because they worry about the stains on their clothes.
- The women in these study villages are very rigid and strict in following certain rules like cleaning all the utensils, clothes used after the periods get over etc.
- There are no safe methods of the disposal of sanitary napkins and clothes used during the menstrual cycle in the village. Most of the women prefer to burn the clothes or dig them into the open places behind their houses. Lack of water access is critical in this regard.

Conclusion

Women's and girls should be educated about the facts of menstruation, physiological implications, significance of menstruation, and proper hygienic practices during menstruation. It is also required to bring them out of traditional beliefs, taboos, misconceptions, and restrictions. Sanitary pads are available in most villages at shops, especially for young girls they are available at Anganwadi centres which are provided at cheaper rates so that the population can easily afford them.

After having easy access, people still don't buy because of lack of awareness. Also the behavioural change communication around this has not been as effective. Wearing the pads make them uncomfortable is one of the major responses that emerged. There are few villages where there is no availability of sanitary products in the local shop. A lot of shame associated with the purchase also is often at play.

There is a need to provide education and equip them with skills regarding safe and hygienic practices and to make appropriate choices so as to enable them to lead a healthy reproductive life and prevent the risk for reproductive tract infections. There is also a need to empower mothers and teachers to function as primary sources of

information on menstruation including reproductive health as they are accessible to handle adolescent issues and facilitate referrals as the need arises.

References:

- Dhingra R, Kumar A, Kour M. Knowledge and practices related to menstruation among tribal (Gujjar) adolescent girls. *Ethno-Med.* 2009;3:43–8
- Gupta J, Gupta H. Adolescence and menstruation. *J Family Welfare.* 2001;47:1–13
- Jothy K, Kalaiselvi S. Is menstrual hygiene and management an issue for the rural adolescent schoolgirls? *Elixir Social Science.* 2012;44:7223–28
- Patle R, Kubde S. Comparative study on menstrual hygiene in rural and urban adolescent girls. *Int J Med Sci Public Health.* 2014;3:129–32.