

Knowledge, Perceptions and Restrictions during Menstruation amongst Women in India

Ronniya Varghese
Intern, Greenwaves Environmental Solution
Vishakapatnam, Andhra Pradesh 530012

Dr. Alice Matilda Mendez
Assistant Professor, Dept Community Medicine
Ayaan Institute of Medical Sciences
Kanakamamidi, Telangana

Abstract:-

➤ Introduction

The continuity of the human race depends on one phenomenon which happens to every woman every month, a biological cycle which is celebrated in some Indian cultures during its first occurrence, is then looked upon with disgust from every subsequent cycle as long as the woman bleeds.

➤ Objective

- To assess the knowledge and perceptions about menstruation among women in the reproductive age group residing in India.
- To identify the restrictions faced by Indian women during menstrual period.

➤ Methodology

A web based cross sectional study was conducted during September 2019 amongst women in the reproductive age group (15 to 45) currently residing in India. 136 participants were included in the study by non – random, snow ball sampling technique starting with 10 randomly selected eligible female contacts of the principle investigator.

➤ Result

The mean age is 27.56 and out of the total participants 65.4% of them are professionals and 19.9% are students. Of the total 45.9% of the participants are married.

➤ Conclusion

Out of the total participants 73.5% said they are comfortable talking to their mothers about their periods and all the married women said that they are comfortable talking about their periods to their husbands. A minority, (24.3%) said they faced restrictions during menses and the most common one was avoiding prayers followed by festivities and celebrations.

I. INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is a monthly phenomenon wherein women usually bleed anywhere between 2-8 days. It is a physiological process, which is associated with the ability to procreate and its onset changes a young woman's life¹. During this time, women make use of different alternatives available to absorb the blood. In certain cases in rural settings there are women who don't even use absorbents and bleed freely. In urban settings, majority of the women use sanitary pads or tampons. Menstruation has always been surrounded by different interpretations all over. Nowadays, there is some openness, but differences in attitude still persist². In certain Indian cultures, a girl's first period is a joyous occasion, as it is an indicator of the girl entering women hood. In such cultures the girl is gifted gold and the families conduct pujas to commemorate the occasion. Once she is done with menarche, the subsequent cycles are looked upon with a notion of impurity³.

In the case of many Indian households, during those 2-8 days, women are treated indifferently. Many of them are not allowed to touch their family members or go near them and are even not allowed to visit places of worship³. Also, in rural settings where women generally use old pieces of cloth or rags as absorbents are forced to dry them in the shade for fear of criticism. Even buying sanitary pads in rural settings is considered a taboo. Since time we can remember there has been a difference in perception amongst the various cultures, religions, and ethnic groups. Often in low-income countries, women and girls are restricted in mobility and behaviour. In many parts of the world, menstruation is still related to a number of cultural taboos as well as feelings of shame and unhygienic. Even in today's modern age menstruation is kept as a secret between mother and daughter¹. It is not discussed in the open. In India, it is considered a natural event, a gift from the God. In general, women's perceptions of menstruation vary among different cultures and religions⁴. There are many taboos surrounding menstruation wherein, women are 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 practices⁵. The knowledge and practices related to menstruation are dependent on socio economic conditions as well⁶.

Very few cultures have accepted menstruation for what it is i.e. a natural phenomenon. With the evolution of these cultures, there has not been any significant change in people's attitudes towards menstruation. Therefore, what remains are daunting questions like what effects do these taboos have on the overall development of women?

Menstruation is the biological process on which the continuity of the human race depends on. It is the most natural phenomenon which is nature's way of indicating that a girl has entered womanhood. With this basic idea in mind, this survey was conducted to learn about women's perception on their periods and to learn if modern educated Indian women still face problems to talk about their periods and the taboos they face.

II. METHODOLOGY

A web based cross sectional study was conducted during September 2019 amongst women currently residing in India. The study population included women in the reproductive age group (15 to 45). Sample size was calculated to be 136 using formula for cross sectional study with an anticipated population proportion of 45 %⁷, confidence level of 95% at 5% significance level and allowable relative error of 20% and considering 10% non response rate. The web based survey was conducted starting with 10 randomly selected eligible female contacts of the principle investigator who were considered as primary respondents. A non-random, snow ball sampling technique was used to include other respondents for the study. The Primary Respondents were asked to answer the semi structured questionnaire and were requested to forward the survey forms to their female contacts in the reproductive age group currently residing in India. The procedure was continued till the required sample size was obtained. The questionnaire included socio demographic variables like age, educational qualification, occupation, per capita income of family, variables related to attitude towards menstruation like avoidance of work, restrictions during menstruation, openness to discuss about menstruation with same and opposite gender and variables related to menstrual hygiene practices. Informed consent was obtained from the study participants and confidentiality of data was assured and maintained throughout the study. Data was entered in Microsoft Excel and analysed using SPSS software. Qualitative data is expressed as frequencies and proportions, quantitative data were summarised as mean (standard deviation).

III. RESULT

A total of 136 females participated in this survey out of which the youngest was 17 years old and the oldest was 42 years old with the mean age being 27.56. Out of the total 55.1% are post graduates, 39.7% are graduates, 3.7% hold or are pursuing a diploma and 1.5% are higher secondary students. 45.9% are married and the rest i.e. 54.1% are single. 65.4% are professionals whereas 7.4% are either unemployed or housewives. 19.9% are students and 7.4% are self employed. Of the total 66.7% said that they are

financially independent whereas the remaining 33.3% said they are not.

When they were asked about when they first got their periods, a majority of 30.8% said at the age of 13 followed by 21.32% that said at age 12. 15.4% said at 14 and 11.03% at 15. While 11.02% said at 11 and a 2.9% at 10. A mere 0.73% said each said at 16, 17, 18 and 19. Lastly 4.4% said they did not remember.

When we inquired about their knowledge on menstruation prior to menarche, a whopping 76.1% said yes whilst the remainder said no. When they were further asked how did they gain knowledge about periods 68.6% said through their mothers, 12.7% said through siblings, 27.5% said via teachers, 41.2% said they're friends told them, 7.8% said they read it in books and magazines, 9.8% learnt via media and finally 1% said through other sources.

We wanted to know if the girls are open to communicate their feelings during their menses with others and thus they were asked who they would confide in from the same sex. 73.5% said their mothers, 39% said sister, 59.6% said their friend and 16.9% said their aunt. While a small percentage of 2.9 said none of the above. With regards to the opposite sex, 18.4% said their father, 11% said brother, 22.1% said their friend, 46.3% said their husband, 19.1% said their boyfriend and 17.6% said they are not comfortable at all talking about menses to the opposite sex.

The girls were then asked if they had any restrictions during menses and 24.3% said yes, while a majority said no. The restrictions faced were as follows avoiding celebrations and festivities (53.1%), avoiding certain food (15.6%), housework (15.6%), prayers (65.6%) and any form of physical activities (50%). Finally they were asked if they missed school/college/work during their menses wherein 86.8% said no, 12.5% said yes and 0.7% said not applicable.

IV. DISCUSSION

The mean age of the participants in this survey is 27.56. Most of the respondents are post graduates followed by graduates, which is an indication of a well qualified group of participants. And it has been observed that slightly more than half are single whereas, the rest of the participants are married. Also, most of the participants work for the private sector and come from financially stable backgrounds. In India, usually there is silence around the topic of menstruation and most young girls are kept in the dark¹. In a similar survey conducted in Mumbai¹, it was seen that either no or very little information was provided to the girls about menstruation. Most learn about it only once they reach menarche. But, we found out through our survey that most of our participants were aware about menstruation even before their first cycle. And most of them said that the source of information was their mothers. The probable reason for this could be that most of the participant's mothers are educated. A very small margin

was seen to be illiterate. These findings are similar to other surveys which said that most of the participants learnt about menstruation through their mothers, sisters and friends^{1,7-9,12}.

From the survey it is clearly visible that 79.1% of the participants use sanitary pads. This should be an indication that most of them live in the city and can afford sanitary pads. But 8% said they use cloth pads. The reason for this could be their poor socio economic background. In a study from Rajasthan⁹ and Delhi⁸, the majority of the young girls said they were using and reusing old cloth, homemade napkins, and very few used cotton wool or sanitary napkins. Cloth is the cheapest material used during menstruation. All kinds of old, ragged, and rejected clothes are kept by women for this and used by most in the slum and rural areas^{12,13,14}. The main reason is the inability to buy sanitary napkins but also the lack of availability in rural areas¹⁴. Lack of knowledge can result in many unhygienic practices like reusing same cloth without proper washing, ignoring health problems, trying to manage the problems faced during menstruation on their own, etc. Adolescent and young girls frequently face these issues and restrictions and these problems are usually not tackled in a proper manner¹. An analysis from Nepal found that young women were not properly maintaining menstrual hygiene¹⁵. The cloth used for menstruation should be cleaned well or else it will become septic and form pus. Although during a study in Delhi¹³, the women were taught to use clean cotton cloth and knew of the consequences of using soiled cloth, observation revealed that old clothes were often kept in a dirty bundle to be used during the periods. Washing the cloth is a matter of concern since nobody especially men, should see any sign of menstruation. Hence, girls and women will have to use moist and damp cloths.

Participants were asked if they had the facility to change pads at home or school or place of work. And most of them said they had access to clean toilets. Another important factor is that sanitary pads should be made available in schools, colleges or places of work in case of emergencies¹. The participants then said they were very comfortable talking about menstruation to their mothers followed by friends then their sister. A small number said they are not comfortable talking to anyone in the same sex about menstruation. The probable reason for this could be the stigma that is associated with this topic. When asked the same question but with regards to the opposite sex, all the married women said their husbands. This shows openness and how freely women can express their discomforts to their male counterparts.

Restrictions during menstruation are widely spoken of in our widely patriarchal society. When the participants were asked if they have ever faced any, a minority said that they have. The most common restriction was they were not allowed to visit places of worship followed by avoidance of any type of celebrations and festivities and physical activities. As per a study in Delhi, 92% of women were restricted in religious and social activities⁹. In Gujarat, menarche is a joyous occasion¹⁶. Studies thus show a rather

harsh situation for girls and women who are considered as unclean^{9, 12} and untouchable while menstruating and hence kept away from normal activities¹³, presumably missing work and school, or being unable to attend places of worship¹², or exercise¹⁷. A study in Ranchi on adolescent girls concludes that cultural and social practices regarding menstruation depend on girls' education, attitude, family environment, culture, and belief¹⁸. Many of the traditions and taboos surrounding menarche and menstruation are originally outgrowth from religion⁴ – a factor that is relatively stable across districts and local groups throughout India, as expressed by the influence religion continues to play on attitudes toward the phenomena¹⁹.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Thakur Harshad, Aronsson Annette, Bansode Seema et al ,Knowledge, Practices, and Restrictions Related to Menstruation among Young Women from Low Socioeconomic Community in Mumbai, India, *Frontiers in Public Health*, VOLUME 2 ,2014, PAGES 72, <https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpubh.2014.00072>,DOI=10.3389/fpubh.2014.00072, ISSN : 2296-2565
- [2]. Cronje H S, Kritzinger I E. Menstruation:symptoms ,management and atti- tudes in university students. *IntJGynaecolObstet* (1991) 35(2):147–50. doi:10.1016/0020-7292(91)90818-P
- [3]. Ananta sharma .14 Illogical Taboos About Menstruation That Still Exist In India. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.storypick.com/menstruating-indian-woman/> [Accessed 30 October 2019].
- [4]. Bhatt R, Bhatt M. Perceptions of Indian women regarding menstruation. *IntJ GynaecolObstet* (2005) 88(2):164–7.doi:10.1016/j.ijgo.2004.10.008
- [5]. Mahon T, Fernandes M. Menstrual hygiene in South Asia : a neglected issue for WASH(water,sanitationandhygiene)programmes. *GendDev* (2010) 18:99–113.doi:10.1080/13552071003600083
- [6]. Drakshayani Devi K, Venkata Ramaiah P. A study on menstrual hygiene among rural adolescent girls. *IndianJMedSci* (1994) 48(6):139–43.
- [7]. Goel MK, Kundan M. Psycho-Social Behaviour of Urban Indian Adolescent Girls during menstruation. *Australas Med J*. 2011;4(1):49–52. doi:10.4066/AMJ.2011.534
- [8]. NairP, GroverV, Kannan A. Awareness and practices of menstruation and pubertal changes amongst unmarried female adolescents in a rural area of EastDelhi. *IndianJCommunityMed* (2007) 32:156–7.doi:10.4103/0970-0218.35668
- [9]. KhannaA, GoyalRS, BhawsarR. Menstrual practices and reproductive problems: a study of adolescentgirls in Rajasthan. *J HealthManage* (2005) 7(1):91–107. doi:10.1177/097206340400700103
- [10]. Tiwari H, Oza U N, Tiwari R. Knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about menar- che of adolescent girls in

Anand district, Gujarat. *EastMediterrHealthJ* (2006) **12**(3–4):428–33.

[11]. Sharma P, Malhotra C, Taneja DK, Saha R. Problems related to menstruation amongst adolescent girls. *IndianJPediatr* (2008) **75**(2):125–9. doi:10.1007/s12098-008-0018-5

[12]. Singh AJ. Place of menstruation in the reproductive lives of women of rural North India. *IndianJCommunityMed* (2006) **31**(3):10–4. doi:10.4103/0970-0218.54923

[13]. Garg S, Sharma N, Sahay R. Socio-cultural aspects of menstruation in an urban slum in Delhi, India. *ReprodHealthMatters* (2001) **9**(17):16–25. doi:10.1016/S0968-8080(01)90004-7

[14]. Dhingra R, Manhas S, Kohli N, Mushtaq AA. Comparative study of understanding of menstrual process among married women belonging to two ecological settings. *J HumEcol* (2007) **22**(3):261–6.

[15]. Adhikari P, Kadel B, Dhungel SI, Mandal A. Knowledge and practice regarding menstrual hygiene in rural adolescent girls of Nepal. *KathmanduUnivMedJ (KUMJ)* (2007) **5**(3):382–6.

[16]. Goel M K, Kundan M. Psycho-social behaviour of urban Indian adolescent girls during menstruation. *AustralasMedJ* (2011) **4**(1):49–52. doi:10.4066/AMJ.2011.534

[17]. Rierdan C, Rise J. Living arrangement and health behaviors in adolescence and young adulthood. *HealthEduResTheoryPrac* (1995) **8**(4):494–503.

[18]. Kumar A, Srivastava K. Cultural and social practices regarding menstruation among adolescent girls. *Soc WorkPublicHealth* (2011) **26**(6):594–604. doi:10.1080/19371918.2010.525144

[19]. Bramwell R, Zeb R. Attitudes towards and experience of the menstrual cycle across different cultural and religious groups. *J ReprodInfantPsychol* (2006) **24**(4):314–22. doi:10.1080/02646830600973990

How did you learn about menstruation?

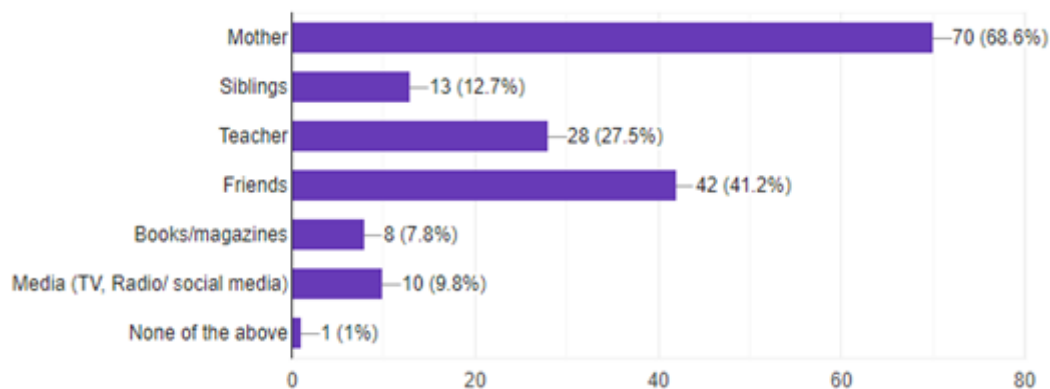


Fig 1:- Shows How Participants Learnt about Menstruation

To whom are you comfortable talking to about your periods? (Opposite Sex)

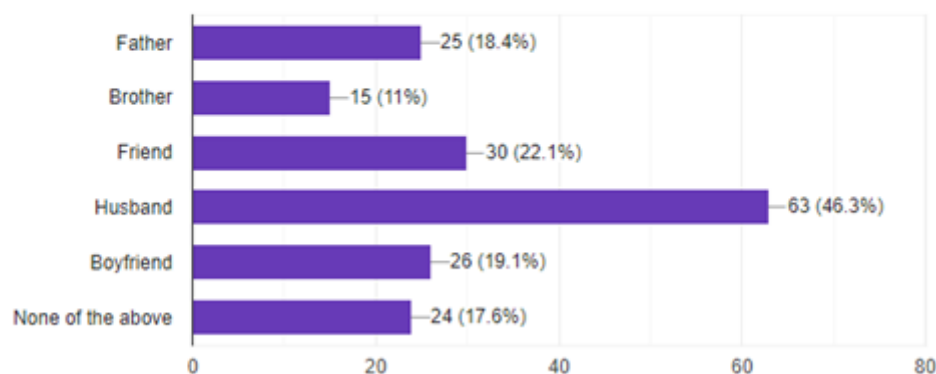


Fig 2:- Talks about Whom the Participants are Comfortable Talking to about their Periods (Opposite Sex)

Types of restriction during menses

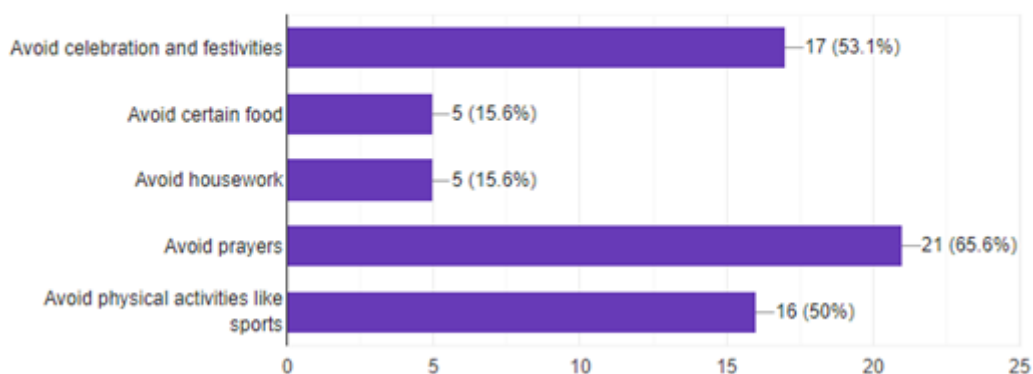


Fig 3:- Restrictions Faced by Women during Menstruation Cycle

Characteristics	Frequency (N=136)	Percentage
Education		
Higher Secondary	2	1.5%
Diploma	5	3.7%
Graduation	54	39.7%
Post Graduation	75	55.1%
Occupation		
Housewife/ Unemployed	10	7.4%
Self Employed	10	7.4%
Student	27	19.9%
Professional	89	65.4%
Religion		
Hindu	70	52.2%
Christian	42	31.3%
Muslim	19	14.2%
Others	3	2.2%

Table 1:- Profile of Study Participants