

Title of an Article: Lived Experiences and Perceptions of University Female Students about Menstruation Restrictions

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Abstract

With the onset of modernization, intellectual women in urban areas are not extremely compelled to follow menstrual pollution. However, practices such as forbidding women from entering the temples and kitchen, cooking food, touching male members of the family, and sleeping on their usual beds when menstruating. This study aims to analyze the lived experiences of urban intellectual women during menstrual restrictions. It also discusses the perceptions of them about the tradition of menstrual restrictions. The participants are the female students pursuing their Masters' degree in sociology at Bhairahawa Multiple Campus Rupandehi. 16 out of 42 participants were selected for interview applying purposive sampling method. The samples include the students permanently living in Bhairahawa's city area. Semi-structured interview was applied to collect the data to discuss about what the female students experience and perceive the tradition of menstruation restrictions. Most of the participants responded that the experience of restriction is the example of structural inequality imposed upon women due to patriarchal perspective of history. They have the experiences of pain and suffering at periods. The participants responded that menstruating restriction is the practice of imposing discrimination and superiority of males. But it was also found that males' perspective is slightly changing with the process of modernization. This research article concludes with the perception of women that menstruation practice is the stigma for the modern society today.

Key Words: Menstrual Practice, wilful action, Imposed Tradition, stigma, Patriarchy, discrimination

Introduction

Menstrual stigma has been demonstrated in many societies. Nepali Hinduism forbids menstruating women to enter a temple or kitchen, share a bed with a husband or touch a male relative. During menstruation, women are 'untouchable'. In many rural communities of Nepal, menstruation is generally considered unholy and impure, and menstrual restrictions and social stigma are prevailing (Crawford et al.,2014). A huge number of women and girls have experience of encountering some forms of menstrual restrictions or exclusions. The concept of purity and impurity is based on religious values and practices. Menstrual beliefs and practices are often culturally constructed. In some cultures, menstruation is considered a sign of physical maturity and fertility; however, in some, it is considered a source of pollution and impurity (Yagnik, 2017). Menstruation is a natural biologic process. However, in many parts of the world societal taboos and stigmas over menstruation still exist. The extreme practice of *Chhaupadi*, a century old Hindu tradition of isolating menstruating women in poorly ventilated menstrual huts is still practiced in certain areas of far western Nepal. Even though the practice of *Chhaupadi* has never been prevalent among urban Nepalese women, because of Nepal government's initiatives on education, hygiene and socio-cultural awareness, the deeply-rooted cultural and religious belief that menstruation is spiritually polluting still exists in the Nepali society.

(Mukharjee, et al.,2020)

Consequently, adolescent girls and women of menstruating age are often victims of menstrual restrictions. Avoiding entering the temple, not attending religious or social gatherings, not touching plants or male members of the family, purifying the bed on the fourth day of menstruation, are just some of the common menstrual practices or restrictions followed by menstruating women(Mukharjee et al.,2020).

Most existing studies on menstrual practices in Nepal have focused on the practice of *Chhaupadi*. However, even in regions and communities in Nepal where this extreme tradition is not practiced, menstrual taboos still affect women's daily lives. While rituals are often imposed on menstruating Nepali women, their perceptions are important to assess in order to implement programs targeting changes in behavioral expectations (Amatya et al.,2018). To date, limited studies have focused on intellectual women's perspectives on existing menstrual practices and restrictions in Nepal.

With the onset of modernization, intellectual women in urban areas are not extremely compelled to follow menstrual pollution. However, practices such as forbidding women from entering the temples and kitchen, cooking food, touching male members of the family, and sleeping on their usual beds when menstruating, which form the very basis of menstrual restrictions at large in Nepal, are more entrenched, widespread and often overlooked. Menstruation-related socio-cultural practices have become significantly less stringent in the past few decades with initiatives from the

Nepalese government and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), specifically those focused on ending *Chhaupadi*; however, many deep-rooted cultural beliefs still exist in the society. Even though women in urban areas of Nepal reported attending social gatherings, visiting workplaces and relatives while menstruating, very few actually reported attending religious gatherings or entering places of worship while menstruating (Mukharjee. et al., 2020).

The research questions raised in this study are: what are the experiences of intellectual women about menstrual restrictions in their daily lives? And what do they actually feel while in restriction during menstruating?

Objectives

To address the above questions, this study has set the following specific objectives:

- To analyze the lived experiences of urban intellectual women during menstrual restrictions.
- To discuss the perceptions of women about the tradition of menstrual restrictions.

This study does not take the women as respondents from remote rural areas of Nepal where it is reported to exist in extremity. The study involves married female students living in urban setting in terms of physical and social and economic development.

Literature Review

As a theoretical tool, critical Menstruation Studies is reviewed based on different literatures produced by diverse scholars from around the world. Bobel et al., (2020) states, ‘Attention to menstrual issues across the life span surfaces broader societal issues and tensions, including gender inequality, practices and discourses of embodiment, processes of racialization and commodification, and emergent technologies as read through various disciplines and interdisciplines’ .He further adds that menstruation as a unit of analysis reveals complicate inequalities across biological, social, cultural, religious, political, and historical dimensions.

Bobel et al.(2020) takes the menstruation studies as fundamental. Menstruation unites the personal and political, the intimate and public and physiological and socio-cultural. Menstruation studies covers all spheres of life. No civilization exists without it. Menstruation is as old as humanity itself. Most articles on Menstruation start by pointing out that menstruation is a normal biological process. This is of course true. But at the same time, Menstruation is so much more for many people. In fact, it is fundamental (Winkler,2020).

Going through different critical menstruation literatures, we find proximity between religion and menstruation practices. The relationships between menstruation and religion, and religion and culture suggest that menstruation is a cultural phenomenon just as much as it is a physiological

one. Religiously and culturally motivated practices compel certain behaviors of menstruants, and those practices, and what menstruation symbolizes and communicates within a particular system, ultimately reproduces religion themselves (Cohen, 2020). Religion acts as theoretical guideline and menstruation is a practical entity. Theory and practice go hand in hand. The obvious fact is religion always shapes menstruation practices. Nepal being Hindu dominated country, menstruation practices are influenced, to some extent, determined by what religious philosophy directs. The concept of purity and impurity always makes the striking debates when we talk about menstruation restrictions in context of Nepal.

Dominant Hindu practices are based on the belief that when women menstruate, impure blood leaves the body, and the body becomes impure (Ueda et al., 2012). The woman's impurity forbids her from practicing religious and other sacred activities. Societal pressures to maintain menstrual restrictions become even more potent when menstruating women internalize these beliefs and begin to practice self-exclusion (Rochild and Piya, 2020).

The common belief in India is that menstruating women are impure and polluting. Religion and culture have placed taboos on menstruating women in every space they occupy—at home, at work, and at places of worship. At home, a menstruating woman is prohibited from preparing food, touching pickle, curd and spice containers, cooking utensils, and even entering the kitchen and puja room (a sacred room where idols are kept and worshipped). In agricultural work, she is told not to touch the crops as they will die (Sukumar, 2020).

Believing the mythical interpretations of menstruation and internalizing the concept of having an 'impure body,' menstruating girls and women become fearful that the god might bring misfortunes onto them or their families. Menstrual problems such as abdominal pain and cramping are interpreted as punishment for not abiding by the restrictions. And because the menstruating woman is removed from religious rites, it becomes easier for larger society to disregard menstruation as a natural process, and instead, blame the menstruating woman for any unfortunate events that might occur, for example, a family member becoming ill or a landslide that destroys a home (Rochchild and Piya, 2020).

Menstruation is associated with impurity in Brahmanical Hinduism due to its position within sin and guilt (Cohen, 2020). Manusmriti is a renowned Hindu religious text that outlines the borders about the menstruation restrictions. It promotes discriminatory arrangements in regards to women. Brahmin men are instructed to avoid sharing a bed with and to avoid having sex with a woman who is menstruating, no matter how much he might desire to avoid eating food that has been touched by a menstruating woman and to avoid holding a conversation with a menstruating woman (Sacred Texts, n.d., 4.57). Men are not allowed even to touch the menstruating women. The much

more discrimination is felt when the man doesn't speak with the women at periods. There are many more restrictions imposed upon women as documented in Manusmriti.

Research Methods

This study is perfectly qualitative. Both primary and secondary data are analyzed for the research. Semi-structured interview was conducted to collect the data about the lived experiences and perception of the participants. Open-ended questions were asked to the participants to gather as more information as possible to address the research objectives. After formulating the questionnaire, each participants were informed about the research act through telephone. The researcher requested the participants to meet at certain location as per their convenience. Interview was taken an average one hour for each participants.

The universe of the study covers whole population of the female students of master's degree in sociology in Bhairahawa Multiple Campus, Siddharthanagar, Rupandhehi, Nepal. There are 42 female students currently studying from first to fourth semester. Among them, 8 students from 2nd semester, 4 students from 4th semester, 2 students from third and 2 students from fourth semester respectively were selected for interview employing purposive sampling method. Thus, altogether 16 participants were selected for the study. Generally, illiterate households perform menstruation practices. But on the contrary, it is also largely practiced in city areas by educated women. This study aims to explore the perceptions and practices of menstruation restrictions among intellectual women residing in city who are pursuing their master degree. Age of participants ranges from 25 to 40 years. While taking samples, participants were selected specially those permanently living in Bhairahwa, that is, relatively city area. The selection criteria of samples also includes the basis of the regularity of students in class and their availability for the interview since a few of them seemed reluctant to expose themselves about the anticipated objectives.

Results and Discussion

Experiences of Women about Menstruation Practices

First Experiences of period

First experience of the participants was found different from each other's which was the reason of their growing and the environment. The common experience among them was a bit of fear for the consequences and attitudes of the family members and the friend circle around. Most participants responded that they were happy because all her friends had already experienced menstruation. They first shared it with her mom due to her hesitation to share with other family members. Some shared with the elder sisters. They could not talk with male members. They were taken to one of

the relatives to hide for 14 days from male members of family. They were fearful that god would curse them if they saw the face of father and brothers. Participant 1 put it this way:

“I had strong faith on God. All what I had to do it because of the wish of God. I had fear that God wouldn't become happy if I saw the face of male members.”

Some participants had rather neither excitement nor tension too. They didn't share with any family members. But their mom came to know it noticing the blood stain in her underwear after 3 days of menstruation. They responded that they didn't tell her mom because they thought that mom would not allow to go for cycling that they loved much. Participant 2 responded that her experience during menstruation was not so fearful for she said that their family was living In Kanpur India at that moment. She shared her experiences this way:

“I was studying in army school. Our school had already trained us. We used to collect 2 rupees every day and buy the necessities for the menstruators. I continued sleeping with my brothers as usual. She didn't have to face any difficulties during period”

Participant 3 responded during interview that she was hidden for 14 days. She was told not to see sun and male members. She was fearful of loneliness. Her mother was frequently visiting her. She responded that she was missing her friends and brothers. Participant 12 shared that she had already had knowledge of the need to hide because she had seen it at the time of her sisters' menstruation. She said that it was natural to exercise this practice because it was continuation of our culture and tradition. Menstrual experiences are the products of social and cultural life. The experiences of participants had also traditional impact. The practices they had to encounter at period claimed the certain restrictions which were largely because of long tradition.

Present lived experiences during Menstruation practices

Shrijana karki (2021) notes that Families may prohibit menstruating women from entering kitchens and temples. In extreme cases, families may isolate women in a separate hut. Menstrual rules are practiced in varying ways throughout Nepal. Women from Hindu Brahmin and Chhetri families primarily follow menstrual practices. However, other castes and ethnic groups may also practise some or all of the menstrual rules (Karki, 2021). Present experiences of Participants were not found so different today. They shared that some restrictions were to be followed and they were free also to some extent. They were strictly prohibited to perform puja in the temple and home, enter the kitchen and cohabit with senior family members especially in-laws. They had the experiences of the circumstances in which they needed to take medicine to postpone period if some family celebrative activities were to be performed. They felt hesitated to partake in such religious functions with the fear of allegation and backbiting during period. They were at times accused and verbally abused if their unintentional touch was experienced during death pollution ceremony.

Half of the participants opined that menstruation practice had no meaning which couldn't be justified on any ground. They were compelled because there was no way around. This was discriminatory practice originated to suppress women in history. They shared that they had not been able to combat social and cultural values. They argued that they were content to some extent because they were not treated as their mothers and grandmother had to suffer from this unjust tradition. But the opinion of the rest of the participants was found quite different in this context. They contended that they should protect the tradition because any society becomes beautiful with full of customs, tradition and values. They felt more than happy during menstruation to contribute for the perpetuation of culture transmitted from their parents. Participant 12 puts it this way: "I don't touch my husband and son during period intentionally. If it happens so, my family members may undergo some sinful consequences. His God almighty may not be happy and we will not get blessings".

Response of participants to the question asked about their sleeping place during menstruation was quite interesting. Half of the participants admitted that they had the experiences of having sexual contact with their husband. They claimed that their husbands had the modern mindset and took it normal. They didn't hesitate to involve in sex if they needed it. Remaining 6 participants responded that they shared the same bed with husband but never involved in sex. They never thought of it. The response of participant 4 was quite different. She didn't not sleep with her husband together at periods.

Perception of the women about menstruation Practices

Imposed tradition or willful action

Responses of participants on the question whether menstruation practice is imposed tradition or willful action were almost similar. They opined that this is fundamentally imposed upon women through generations. They claimed that women are compelled to it for maintaining the emotional aspect of family and society. They didn't want their family members to feel shame in front of the society. One of the participants shared that she went to participate in her brother's wedding celebration during periods with a lie. It is imposed tradition in a sense that they should be deprived of wearing make-up, performing puja in a temple, and wearing Tika. Participant 4 told the researcher that being in the state of impurity, she should practice this tradition. She presented herself with little conservative note. For her, it is willful action. She becomes very happy at periods because she thinks that she is purifying body with this practice. She rejected the view that menstruation practice was the forceful imposition of family and society.

Women in the study area reported that during menstruation they were forbidden from many things. Touching anything while menstruating is believed to pollute —too dirty for anyone else to use. A

menstruating woman should be careful to not let participate many social and cultural activities. Women interviewees talked about how at the end of their menstruation, they were instructed to bathe for purifying themselves. The sense of isolation and segregation women have to face is not willful action. Rochchild and Piya(2020) mentions ‘that the patriarchal system reinforces prescribed gender roles. The seclusion practices remind women that they must police themselves once they start menstruating, that young women become ‘polluted’ and ‘impure,’ and that they must conduct themselves accordingly, including secluding themselves from men and boys”.

Change in Male’s Perspective

During study, Males were not taken as samples. The researcher attempted to include the role and perspectives of males during menstruation through the eyes of the women. The question was basically revolved around the role of their husband and other male members of their family. The role of their husband was found quite positive. Some males were concerned about the extreme forms of menstrual exclusion and disagreed with the societal view on menstrual exclusion. Younger men often disagreed with their parent's views (Subedi and Parker,2021). They tended to oppose the menstruation taboos and assisted them by buying the pad when requested. They didn’t force the wives to practice it because they thought it as the sign of conservatism. According to the participants, their father in laws adhered to this practice as lack of knowledge and their intention to continue the tradition. It shows the changed perspective of younger generations and reluctance of old generations.

Conclusion

Menstruation is regarded globally as biological and natural process of female body. Nevertheless, some of the taboos are practiced even in intellectual urban people in Nepal as imposed by traditional conceptions. Women are treated as impure and unholy at their periods. The experiences of women regarding taboos are not similar. For many of them it is painful as they have to encounter many unavoidable obligatory practices as strict prohibition in entering temple and kitchen and performing puja, celebrating social and cultural traditions and many more. For some participants, the experiences are not so terribly projected. They consider the taboos as the normal carriers of tradition which should be celebrated. For those perceiving taboos as the impure and unholy, the abusing comment of the elders and neighbors at periods may signal more tormenting experiences of the women. Women perceive this practice as imposed tradition of patriarchy that no doubt welcomes structured inequality and introduces inhuman and barbaric treatment to the women. It is not the case ever. For some of the women it is willful action transmitted from the past generations as tradition. Though it is shameful act to deal with the modern mindset of the globe, younger generations of males are not attracted to adhering to the tradition. It manifests the changed perspectives among males which depicts the optimistic future in this area.

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