

Menstrual Taboos and Gender Violence

Bhagyavathi, H.R.¹ and Santhosh Naik R.²

¹Assistant Professor of Sociology, Government First Grade College Hungund, Bagalkote Distric, Karnataka -587118, Mobile: 9886147275 E-mail: bhagyavathi17@gmail.com

²Chairperson and Assistant Professor, Dept..of Studies and Research in Sociology, Karnataka State Open University, Mysore, Karnataka, Mob: 9845561946, E-mail: santhoshnaikr@gmail.com

To Cite this Article

Bhagyavathi, H.R., & Santhosh Naik R. (2024). Menstrual Taboos and Gender Violence. *Studies in Indian Sociology*, 1: 2, pp. 117-124.

Abstract: Menarche is the first occurrence of the period; it is the phase that a female enters into the reproductive stage. Menstruation is the physiological and biological process that occurs once a month in an adult woman. The practices, etiquettes, and taboos imposed on menstruating women seclude and exclude them from many social, cultural, and religious aspects of life. This is a kind of gender-based violence that is driven by the socio-cultural and religious beliefs connected with gender norms. The taboos which are social and religious sanctions impose restrictions on women to do something or to forbid them from doing something just because they are bleeding. The imposition of menstrual taboos has a greater impact on her day-to-day life. It affects her physical, mental, psychological, emotional and social health. She is restricted in her movement, intake of certain food, entry into the kitchen or places of worship, etc. Many menstrual etiquettes and practices have a direct impact on women's reproductive health. The lack of accessibility to menstrual products and unhygienic menstrual management result in infection, cervical problems, and other related health issues. Many girls drop out of school and college once they start menstruating. The imposition of taboos on women leads to many problems and deprivations of her basic rights, and dignity. The taboos, unfriendly practices, and procedures related to menstruation lead to gender inequality thus violating the basic rights and dignity of women.

Keywords: Menstruation, Taboo, Gender Violence, Gender Inequality, Dignity

Introduction

“Our bodies are celebrated when we bear children. But menstruation - a prerequisite for pregnancy- is something that we are expected to hide. Menstruating bodies quickly turn from miracle makers into polluters. The stain becomes a mark of shame.”

Anna Dashlqvist

Menstruation is a normal physiological process of a woman's body that occurs approximately once a month. Menarche is the first occurrence of the menstrual period

of an adolescent girl, which is a biological transformation (the transition period) from childhood to adulthood. It is cyclical and has monthly bleeding for 3-5 days. It is when a girl enters into the sexual reproductive stage, which starts from puberty and ends with menopause. This occurs between the ages of 11 years to 17-18, which a woman undergoes more than half of her lifetime. Menstruation is a natural physiological process that affects every girl after attaining puberty. Menstruation is associated with physical, mental, psychological, and socio-economic conditions. It's the period of development for physical health behaviour, and social skills.

The practices, etiquettes, and taboos imposed on menstruating women seclude and exclude them from many social, cultural, and religious aspects of life. The taboos which are social and religious sanctions impose restrictions on women to do something or to forbid them from doing something just because they bleed. The imposition of menstrual taboos has a greater impact on her day today life. It affects her physical, mental, psychological, emotional and social health. She is restricted in her movement, intake of certain food, entry into the kitchen or places of worship, etc. Many menstrual etiquettes and practices have a direct impact on women's reproductive health.

The lack of accessibility to menstrual products and unhygienic menstrual management result in infection, cervical problems, and other related health issues. Many girls drop out of school and college once they start menstruating. The imposition of taboos on women leads to many problems and deprivations of her basic rights, the condition is still worse in backward and developing countries. It has become very difficult to address the socio-cultural taboos and beliefs of menstruation because women and girls are less read, and illiterate when compared to men. They lack knowledge about menstruation and reproductive health. Gender inequality and unfriendly practices and procedures violate the basic rights and dignity of women.

UN Human Rights Experts noted that "Around the world, the human rights concerns related to women's menstrual cycle are still largely disregarded by policymakers. A failure to address the menstrual and health needs of women and girls has a detrimental impact on all areas of their lives and violates their fundamental right to equality as well as the right to participate in public, economic, social, and cultural life. (United Nations, 2019.)

What is Gender-Based Violence?

Of all the violence committed, gender violence is the most prevalent form of human rights violation in all societies. It is a form of violence that is deep rooted in gender inequality. Any violence committed against any individual because of their gender is called gender violence. Gender-based violence affects both men and women; however, women are more likely to become victims of gender violence than men.

Gender-based violence refers to acts of maltreatment that are directed towards an individual or community because of their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality and reflects harmful norms and practices (UNHCR 2021).

European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) defines, Gender based violence as, “Gender-based violence and violence against women are terms that are often used interchangeably as it has been widely acknowledged that most gender-based violence is inflicted on women and girls, by men. However, using the ‘gender-based’ aspect is important as it highlights the fact that many forms of violence against women are rooted in power inequalities between women and men. The terms are used interchangeably throughout EIGE’s work, reflecting the disproportionate number of these particular crimes against women.”

Menstruation and Gender Violence – Inter-Connection

The taboos surrounding menstruation and the socio-cultural and religious factors that influence her overall experiences are deeply interconnected. A mere universal physiological process has a greater impact on physical, mental, psychological health, and socio-economic condition of a menstruating woman.

It is a common process for all women, but they are sensitive and not openly talked matter. Even in the 21st century, it is considered to be a stigma, and the shame around menstruation continues to persist. Menstruation is not considered a priority to deal with, discuss, or discourse. Shame and silence are experiences shared by menstruating women all over the world. The practices, traditions, and beliefs about menstruation treat women as impure and dirty during menstruation.

Women continue to suffer the taboos of centuries. Law, medicine, religion, and psychology have isolated and devalued menstruating women. Menstruation is a factor in the control of women by men not only in ancient and primitive societies, where knowledge of physiology is rudimentary at best but also in our post-industrial world”- (Delaney et al., 1988)

The United Nations Human Rights Council (2014) for the first time spelled out that the stigmatization of menstruation and the scarcity of resources required to manage menstruation an obstacles in the fight for gender equality and that they affect the human rights of women and girls. This a big step for an organization that, in its silence about menstruation, all too often reflects the world in which it operates. (Dahlqvist P. 26)

During menstruation, the woman finds it hard to pronounce the word ‘period’ without any hesitation and not feeling ashamed. And every woman can relate to this situation. It’s a feeling of disgust, a sense of dirt. It clings to both the mind and the body. To suffer from shame, the shame that causes the paralyzing fears of branding menstruation as something dirty and secrecy. The socialization and cultural practices

make a female feel and believe that she is impure and dirty during her menstrual cycle. And she is conditioned to believe it so.

Pliny the Elder, who died in 79 CE, warned: 'If a woman strips herself naked while she is menstruating, and walks round a field of wheat, the caterpillars, worms, beetles, and other vermin, will fall from off the ears of corn ... bees will forsake their hives if touched by a menstruous woman ... linen boiling in the cauldron will turn black, the edge of a razor will become blunted.' But then, he also believed that drinking the blood of a gladiator would cure epilepsy. (Hampton, Aeon digital Essays)

Auntie Flo, on the rag, girl flu, back in the saddle, jam, and bread, going to Oklahoma, howlin' at the moon – these are just some of the many English expressions used to avoid the embarrassing subject of menstruation. The time has come to speak plainly and directly about this straightforward biological function of the human body. As you read this today, more than 800 million women worldwide are having a period. None of us would exist without it, and yet it remains one of our most tenacious biological taboos. Writers and broadcasters happily discuss sex, digestion, and blood circulation—all natural processes – while menstruation is still off-limits. (Hampton, Aeon digital Essays).

The shame of having to make her bodily problems public is that menstruation is a very private matter, and she could not speak it, not even to her brothers and fathers. When menstrual shame is combined with poverty, there are systemic violations of the right to dignity, the right to freedom from discrimination, the right to education, and the right to health and privacy – to name a few of the human rights that can be linked to menstruation.

Most of all, the etiquette related to menstruation rather works as taboos than menstrual practices. Maintaining secrecy is the first and foremost important etiquette of menstruation. Anna Dahlqvist, in her book, *It's Only Blood: Shattering the Taboo of Menstruation* (P.15), says, "A kind of 'menstrual etiquette' that involves keeping the menses more or less secret, especially in front of boys and men, is not unique to Uganda. It is a universal understanding that seems to mark people who menstruate all over the world: there is something to hide here".

Menstruation is not perceived as a natural physiological process, and in those communities in Nepal in which Chhaupadi (Chhaupadi is a tradition practiced in Nepal, where menstruating girls and women are kept in the cattle shed in a separate place (also called chhau goth) for 13 days during their first period and for 5–7 days of each month during menstruation) is practiced, it is believed that the touch of a menstruating woman or girl is impure, requiring husbands and family members to bathe if touched. (W.Richard P.318)¹

W. Richard notes that, the banishment to the chhaupadi goth or shed means that they are forced to live in unhygienic and exposed conditions. According to the

beliefs about menstruation, women and girls are viewed as impure and unclean during menstruation and are not permitted to eat ghee (clarified butter), yogurt, curd, or drink milk. Instead, they are only permitted to eat a restricted range of foods, for example, flatbreads with salt. This deprives women and girls of a balanced diet and important nutrition during menstruation. In addition to prohibitions on foodstuffs, women and girls often are required to engage in physically demanding work during the period that they are effectively banished to the chhaupadi shed. For example, they undertake digging, collecting firewood, and farm labour.

He also notes that though there are no specific statistics about the reported violence against menstruating women who live in Chhupadi women and girls staying in the chhaupadi goth die as the result of snake bites, scorpion stings, or animal attacks. In addition, the sheds offer little or no protection from the weather, with some women being reported to have died of exposure.

When women and girls are sent to the chhaupadi huts because they are viewed as impure, during their menstruation, they are also vulnerable to sexual assault. Isolated and removed from other houses, the women are unprotected, and research suggests that sexual assaults are not reported due to the stigma associated with rape (UN 2011). Research suggests that women and girls are too afraid to sleep in the chhaupadi goth due to concerns about sexual assault or being bitten by snakes (Action Aid 2021).

A female community health volunteer observed that the sheds were not secure and safe. They are small, with no proper ventilation, light, electricity and other necessities. There are many cases in which women have died of cold and suffocation. Things get worse in winter when the women light fires for heat inside the shed with no ventilation. Sanitation and hygiene is another problem. (W. Richard P. 324).

Similar kind of cases are reported from villages in Karnataka, The Hindu newspaper reported that in Dodda Gollarahatti, a village in Yeraballi panchayat in Hiriya taluk of Chitradurga district practicing seclusion of menstruating women away from their village, menstruating women have to live outside the village for three to five days every month, a woman who gives birth is not allowed to enter her house for two or three months. While staying in the menstruation house they use separate vessels, utensils, clothes, and other items. In this patriarchal and religious society, the routine biological process of menstruation acquires the dimensions of a curse that manifests itself in bleeding. This notion is so ingrained in Kadu Gollas that even educated professionals of the community accept it. During this time they cannot work, bathe, touch anyone, or cook their own food. The Kadu Golla community believes that women are impure during their menstrual cycle. The villagers say they cannot let menstruating females stay in the village and make it impure. Around 30 kilo meters from Arasikere town there are three Kadu Golla settlements, of which the largest is K.Gollarahatti. Shekar R.,26, the

Youth Congress president of the area, said that more than 100 women had undergone hysterectomies at the age of 30 in the three settlements. These kinds of practices deprive the fundamental right of life and liberty and the human right to live.

The concept of pure and impure also deprives of women undertaking many rites and rituals that a man performs normally. The principle orthodox objection to females' serving in a sacerdotal capacity is biological menstruation. Although in modern Hindu society, the rules regarding this subject have been relaxed and indeed it seems to be politically correct not to mention it, ritual restrictions on menstruation cannot be construed as discriminatory because all excretions of the body (blood, mucous, tears, etc.) are considered as ritually impure, and all males and females in such a condition are excluded from any contact with the Deity or with Yajnas. (Narayanan V P. 9).

Measures to mitigate Gender-Based Violence related to Menstrual Taboos:

Addressing the issues related to gender violence is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon. It is not just a gender-related problem but socio, cultural religious, economic political, psychological, and spiritual which needs a comprehensive approach.

- Imparting Education to create awareness and develop a scientific attitude towards menstruation.
- Introducing the topics related to menstruation, taboos, gender violence, and such related issues in the curriculum.
- Improve the health care services and provide menstrual and reproductive health services and education.
- Implementing laws and legislations to protect against gender-based violence, especially provisions laws to address violence related to menstrual taboos. To protect the victims and to punish violators.
- Implementing strict laws to eradicate the unscientific practice like seclusion, separate living, abandonment, etc,
- To create awareness about menstrual health, personal hygiene, and related health issues that require urgent attention and action from governments, civil society, and individuals.
- To bring into practice the law providing women the right to free access to menstrual health products and menstrual leave in order to create an inclusive approach to menstruation.
- Women empowerment programmes community engagements; mass media all play a pivotal role in this regard.
- Role NGOs, International organizations, and other organizations.

- To create a menstrual awakening in society to acknowledge menstruation dignity as a human right and to understand and become compassionate towards women during their menstruation.

Conclusion

Gender-based solutions are needed for issues with menstruation, taboos, and violence associated with menstrual taboos. Since menstruation is a biological process unique to women, it must be treated fairly. Gender-specific interventions must be implemented to address the problem. Menstrual health hygiene, taboos, and gender violence are concerns that have been addressed in the past few years.

“The fact that we have talked about menstruation more in recent years is connected to a budding global menstruation movement,” says Anna Dahlqvist, with a hint of optimism. The media, non-governmental groups, and activists are all contributing to the development of this movement. It even makes its way to UN politicians and decision-makers. What was once considered intolerable and confined to private life is now entering politics. But we have a lot of catching to do. (Dahlqvist. A.P.10).

It takes a persistent and collaborative effort by governments, communities, civil society, and international organizations to mitigate gender-based violence associated with menstrual taboos. It entails challenging deeply rooted cultural conventions and advancing a society that is more inclusive and egalitarian.

Note

1. Richard Whitecross, Menstruation and Gender-Based Violence - (Praveen, N. Gender-Based Violence in Armed Conflict and Displacement and Sustainable Development Goals: A Case Study in International Law.)

References

- Basu, A., & Tripathi, P. (2022). Comprehending the Bleeding Body: Epistemological Violence and (Un) Tabooing Menstruation in Selective Media Texts in India. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 24(6), 18.
- Burt, Z., Nelson, K., & Ray, I. (2016). *Towards gender equality through sanitation access*. UN WOMEN.
- Dahlqvist, Anna. *It's Only Blood: Shattering the Taboo of Menstruation*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.
- Delaney, Janice, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth. *The curse: A cultural history of menstruation*. University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Garg, S., & Anand, T. (2015). *Menstruation related myths in India: Strategies for combating it*. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, 4(2), 184-186.

Narayanan V (2005) *Gender and Priesthood in the Hindu Traditions*. Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies, vol.18, 22–31

Praveen, N. Gender-Based Violence in Armed Conflict and Displacement and Sustainable Development Goals: A Case Study in International Law.

Unclean and outcast: Women are victims of the regressive practices in the Kadu Golla community in Karnataka (Published: Aug 24, 2012, 00:00 IST) <https://frontline.thehindu.com/social-issues/article30167038.ece>

<https://aeon.co/essays/throughout-history-and-still-today-women-are-shamed-for-menstruating>)

<https://doi.org/10.4103/2249-4863.154627>

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2019/03/international-womens-day-8-march-2019#>