

Menstruation: A Journey towards Transformation

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Abstract— The onset of menstruation marks reproductive maturity in women and attainment of menarche is deemed as a developmental milestone. But unfortunately menstruation and menstrual practices along with menstrual waste disposal have been put under an envelope of fallacy and stigma. This issue has always been inadequately recognized and it has always been sidelined while designing programmes for improving women's health. In recent times it has been manifested that the scenario surrounding menstruation has been rapidly changing in an affirmative direction. A good number of people are coming up with new ideas and ventures which in turn are equipping the young generation to deal with menstruation in a natural and hygienic way. The transformation has been well reflected in the behavior and practices among adolescent girls for better management of menstrual hygiene. Through this piece of paper the researcher strives to pen down her experience, she has accumulated while attempting to from an idea about the transformation both at level of perception and practice regarding menstruation among youngsters in the schools of Birbhum district, West Bengal.

Index Terms— Menstruation, menstrual practices, menstrual waste disposal, menstrual hygiene, transformation, affirmative direction , behavior and practice, adolescent girls



1. INTRODUCTION

Reproductive health encompasses a huge part of a woman's life as her role in the process of procreation is indispensable. The onset of menstruation marks reproductive maturity in women and attainment of menarche is deemed as a developmental milestone. But for decades menstruation has been synonymous with stigma. An aura of mystery and misleading notion have always isolated the issue and tagged it as "Women thing". The upshot has been clearly manifested in the ambiguous attitude and perception of people towards menstruation. This issue has always been overlooked as insignificant or trivial when it comes to women's health.

Nature evolves continually, and so as the society. Consequently the elements of society, like value, culture, norms, institution also transforms with time. In recent epoch, a constructive transformation has been spotted to rupture the age old web of misconception around menstruation. The notion of menstruation has been amended from a shameful occurrence to a crucial health issue which needs systematic management. The reformed perception is quite apparent in the practices and behavior of the women towards management of menstrual hygiene. Innovative ventures from both government and non-governmental organizations have attempted to revise the level of knowledge regarding menstruation and menstrual practices and in turn are equipping the young generation to deal with it in a systematic and dignified way.

Through this piece of paper the researcher strives to pen down her experience, she has accumulated while attempting to from an idea about the transformation both at level of perception and practice regarding menstruation among youngsters. The study which was conducted in schools of Birbhum district, also explores potential triggers behind this transformation.

2. OBJECTIVES

- a) To scrutinize and reflect the changing scenario around menstruation among adolescents.
- b) To explore and indicate possible factors responsible for this conversion.

3. METHODOLOGY:

This particular study was conducted in five high schools in Birbhum District. The entire district has been divided into five blocks. The researcher selected five government sponsored or aided higher secondary schools from each block. The selected schools are mainly girls' schools but writer also had also taken into account a co education school in order to add a different perspective to the study.

The main respondents of this study are the adolescent girls of the selected schools and they have been divided into two groups as per their age of puberty. Respondents are selected from class VII and IX. The second group of respondents is five head of the institutions. The researcher has also taken into consideration secondary group of respondents and they are mother of the adolescents' girls in order to substantiate the transformation.

The researcher have carried out focus group discussions with the girl students with the help of proper FGDs guide and conducted interviews with other respondents. For the entire study the researcher have to use purposive or convenient sampling for selecting the schools , primary and secondary respondents as the issue is being very sensitive . The researcher has been able to work with those schools only who have voluntarily agreed to provide relevant information.

4. DISCUSSION:

After detailed analysis of the information, collected from FGDs and interviews, it can be asserted that the adolescents' girls are

now developing a whole new insight about menstrual hygiene management. The indication of transformation can be traced in

different level of the entire process.

4.1 AWARENESS

For any change to happen, the first requisite is to make people aware about its requirement. Menstrual hygiene scheme launched by Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India (GOI) has aspired to promote menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls (10-19) in rural areas of selected district in 2011. From 2014 onwards the scheme was extended to all districts under Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakram to enhance MH knowledge, improve hygiene practices, provide subsidized sanitary absorbents, and raise awareness of MHM at school. (Admin) Menstrual Hygiene Management has also been incorporated as a crucial agenda in Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and SBA. The partnership between Government and Non Governmental Organizations has also proved to be fruitful in raising awareness among youngsters. While focus group discussions majority of the girls recounted their learning about the whole process of menstrual hygiene management. It is quite apparent that this programme has helped them to upgrade their level of knowledge, and enable them to make informed choices to secure hygiene during menstruation. Even the mothers are very appreciative about the endeavor, as in their words "Our daughters are now able to manage their monthly episodes by themselves and even they make us learn to maintain proper hygiene during menstruation."

4.2 PERCEPTION

During childhood the inquisitiveness of children regarding menstruation are often being suppressed by associating an impression of prohibition. The students conveyed that many of them do not even hear about it before having their first periods. During onset of their puberty, they construct a notion of menstruation as something shameful and impure occurrence on the basis of the information passed on by their earlier generation. But in contemporary era enhanced awareness concerning menstruation and its management has enabled these adolescent girls to transform their perception. They have started identifying it as a customary biological process, as during the sessions they expressed "it happens to every girl. Didis have told us that it is quite normal incident and there is nothing to be afraid or ashamed of." The girls also have gained insight about why and how menstruation occurs.

4.3 PROHIBITION

Since ages a number of prohibitions have been allotted to women during their monthly episode of bleeding. In Vasistha Dharma Shashtra the law givers stipulated various bans on activities of menstruation women like "During her period she shall not apply collyrium to her eyes, nor anoint her body, nor bathe in water; she shall sleep on the ground; she shall not sleep in the day-time, nor touch the fire, nor make a rope, nor clean her teeth, nor eat meat, nor look at the planets, nor drink out of a large vessel, or out of joined hands, or out of a copper vessel." (Chawla, 1992). Although gradually the rigorous prohibitions have become quite flexible, but they still subsist like, not to take part in any religious activities, restrictions on intake of certain type of food items, not to touch pickle, not to wash head, etc.

It can be extracted from the narration of the respondents that in this era, although the young girls are compelled to abide by those conventional rules, but they are also keen to find the logic behind it. The changed perception regarding menstruation has motivated them to ask for validation of these practices. They are no longer satisfied with half hearted answers they receive from their mothers or other family members. Their inquisitiveness can be traced from their questions itself "If our goddess also experience menstruation, then why are we prohibited to take part in their worship, while menstruating?"

4.4 ATTITUDE

An attitude is "a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols" (Hogg & Vaughan 2005, p.150). Attitude can be recognized as combination of beliefs and feeling which determines the behavioral traits towards certain incidents. Similarly, an adolescent girl during socialization is enforced to believe that the monthly bleeding is linked with impurity and eventually she develops a feeling of shame and mystery towards it. As an obvious consequence, their activities associated with menstruation become ambiguous and they tend to hesitate in articulating even severe health issues they suffer from.

The opinions of new age adolescent girls expressed during discussions notifies that exposure to different pertinent information, increased level of awareness, transformed insight regarding menstrual cycle and its management has transformed their attitude towards menstruation. They develop a casual attitude towards it and take it as mere health issue which is a regular part of their life. Although there is still certain curiosity exist in their minds which are remained unanswered, but they are now prepared to deal with it methodically, without any unnecessary fuss.

4.5 MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MANAGEMENT

The transformations in the intellect of the young girls have been replicated in their practice. It is very much apparent in their conversation that now a days they follow the hygienic measures, that have been inculcated among themselves through various sensitization programmes. Majority of the respondents have recounted that they mostly use sanitary napkin rather than cloths, take regular baths and try to maintain cleanliness, and even they are aware of taking nutritious foods, sufficient amount of water etc. They also told that regular routine are not being hampered during menstruation like attending school,

playing with friends. They don't have to find excuses to skip game period or dance practice during their periods. From their description it has become comprehensible that, management of menstrual hygiene has now become free from age old misconceptions and prohibitions. During discussion it has been also revealed that although the girls are becoming fully aware about proper menstrual hygiene management, but sometimes due to lack of proper amenities, they are not able to convert their understanding into proper action. Till now most neglected part of MHM is menstrual waste management and this ignorance has hindered the young girls to follow proper procedures for environmental friendly disposal of menstrual waste. And in this situation they are not only harming their own health but also others and also increasing the risk of environmental pollution.

This transformation is possibly the immediate consequence of changing scenario regarding menstruation and menstrual hygiene management. In contemporary society this change can be traced in different activities and incidents. Man has imprinted his footprint in the forbidden world of women through a path breaking initiative of producing cheap sanitary napkin by Mr. Arunachalam Muruganathan, the period man of India. (Mohla, 2017) The change has also been reflected in recent movies, advertisements and even in social media. Movies like Padman, (R.Balki, 2016) documentaries like "Period. End of Sentence" (India, 2019) has promoted the importance of proper menstrual hygiene management. The Bollywood stars like Akshay Kumar, Sonam Kapoor have also exploited their stardom to raise awareness against stigmatized notion of menstruation and to encourage better practice. The commercials also convey that the needs of the young girls should be properly addressed as they mostly remain unheard. Now a day the social media has also become a platform for promoting menstrual hygiene. The print media is also not lagging behind. The famous books of Twinkle Khanna, and "Menstrupedia by Ms Aditi Gupta (Haynes, 2016) have addressed the issue to reach out to larger people with pertinent knowledge and information. So it is quite apparent that the age old shackles of superstitions has been wrecked and stigmatized notion of menstruation has been shaken by a wave of change from different dimensions. As an obvious consequence the perception and attitude of people towards menstrual hygiene management have also followed a constructive path which aims to create a milieu of comfort for the women.

5. CONCLUSION:

The notion of menstruation has gone through various makeovers in different era. The narration from history divulges two paradoxical views about menstruation. Sometimes the issue was comprehended as something holy and mystic and even believed to have potency to purify, protect and cast spell. Primarily an impression of impurity and pollution has always been associated with menstruation. But in contemporary era, menstruation is gradually attaining the recognition of a biological feature of female organism. From the above discussion, the researcher also has been able to authenticate the transformation which has been well observed in the behavior of adolescent girls while dealing with menstruation especially in public places like school. The young girls are now educated enough to embrace menstruation as natural process without any deceptive notion. It is believed that a young mind is quite fertile, where seeds of new ideas can be nurtured and they can also be the

promoter of it. In this situation the altered perception of menstruation can be made well accepted in the larger society through these young students as they can act as vital change agent who will contribute constructively towards shaping the future society.

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