MENSTRUAL EDUCATION PROCESS AMONG ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN GOA

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ABSTRACT

The process of learning about menstruation, bodily changes and sex reflects the socio-cultural situation in society. The teachings regarding menstruation within the family, formal education system and society have been analysed in this paper to understand learning and un-learning process which takes place. The menstrual lessons through cultural practices and language usage are closely looked at which educates the adolescent girl about menstruation. The formal school teaching about the body, state and voluntary organisation's interventions on this health aspect of girls is analysed in the paper to understand the probable dilemma in the minds of adolescent girls about menstruation. The inferences are drawn from narratives shared by 150 college going adolescent girls in Goa.

Keywords: Menstruation, Family, Body, Practices, Adolescent

INTRODUCTION

'Periods', 'Menses', 'Monthly Cycle' or 'M.C' are the terms we use to refer to Menstruation. Each word connotes from the meaning itself, i.e. blood flow which comes every month. Menstruation can be defined as "Once every month or so, the lining tissues of the inside of the womb come away and are passed out through the vagina with some blood which is known as menstruation "or having a period" (Moronkola O. A. and Uzuegbu V. U: 2006).

Medical science defines menstruation sometimes as a pathological condition. However, there have been many research studies which indicate that menstruation is not only biological but is also a cultural event in Women's Life (Kissling: 1996).

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out by conducting 150 personal interviews with adolescent girls. 75 interviews were conducted in a college in North Goa and 75 interviews were...
conducted in a college in South Goa. Girl's common room was used to interview the respondents. Selection of sample was based on availability sampling method. Respondents were in their late adolescent age i.e., 18-19 years.

Personal visits and interviews with staff of government agencies and NGOs were conducted to know the services for adolescent girls in the State. Brochures, annual reports, websites, books were also accessed to analyse their work in the field of adolescent health.

DISCUSSION

Menstrual Education: Lessons from the community

Agents of menstrual education are many. Family, especially the mother, 119 (79%) is usually the first informant about menstruation for the adolescent girls. As the adolescent experience menarche and menstruation, she learns about it from various direct and indirect sources such as menarche associated celebrations, language used to refer menstruation, religious practices, educational institutes, government agencies and NGOs and menstrual activism.

The menarche celebrations

The 'menarche' is rejoiced by the family members by communicating it to close relatives or cooking a special sweet dish in Goa. However, there is no special event which is performed among Goan Hindu or Christian families to celebrate menarche unlike in other States of the country like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka (Narasimhan: 2011).

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Table No.1: Menarche related celebrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of menarche related Celebration</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Celebration</td>
<td>118 (79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweet Dish</td>
<td>20 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wore Saree and taken to temple after 5 days</td>
<td>4 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aarti sung</td>
<td>4 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>4 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>150 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20 (13%) said that their mothers prepared sweet dish like vermicelli kheer, Gulab Jamun or fruit custard. There were four respondents who were native of Karnataka. They said that there were made to wear green colour saree and there was function in their village. All relatives and neighbours gave gifts to her. They were also taken to temple after 5 days of menstruation and head bath.
Speaking about menstruation

Menstruation in the local language (Konkani) is known as 'Mhaino' (Month) or 'Masik Pali' (monthly cycle). However, there are numerous terms which adolescent girls shared through interviews to refer to menstruation. These phrases or words used in our local languages largely gives a meaning which means 'to exclude' or which is 'unclean'.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local terms used to describe menstruation among respondents</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Periods</td>
<td>104 (69.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhair Asa</td>
<td>77 (51.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy Birthday</td>
<td>37 (24.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kawlo Afudlo</td>
<td>19 (12.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC</td>
<td>57 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batli/Tomato futli</td>
<td>8 (5.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mhaino Asa</td>
<td>8 (5.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- 'Bhair javap' (one to be excluded): A Menstruating woman has to practice total exclusion where she is not allowed in the kitchen and has to stay separately. There is a fear of contamination, and some say that she gets to rest from daily chores.
- 'Kawlo Afudlo' (touched by crow): Indirect way of telling that if a crow touches someone, she becomes untouchable.
- 'Bhashe' (untouchable): Menstruating women are not allowed to touch anyone or anything.
- 'Adchan' (problem): Menstruation which is a biological function of the body and which is a normal bodily function of women in reproductive age is considered a problem because of the restrictions imposed on her during menstruation.
- 'Haat Bhaille' (one who should not be touched by hand): No one is allowed to touch her during menstruation as she is considered as impure or polluted.
- 'Mhaino' (month): Mhaino refers to a monthly cycle, and there is no derogatory meaning attached to it.
- 'Basla' (excluded, sitting): As a menstruating woman has to sit separately in one place assigned to her hence this term is used.
- 'Shock yeta' (untouchable, if touched gets shock): This term is used to tell the children so that they do not touch the menstruating women in the family.

These are commonly used terms in Goa. Each of the term used by people indicates that...
menstruation is considered to be something to be ashamed of, impure and to be excluded. Usage of such terms may transmit an understanding among the adolescent girls that they should consider themselves to be impure and that menstruation is not something healthy or natural but something where 'God' will punish them. These terms can become one of the sources of information for adolescent girls about menstruation. Menstruation has been considered as dirt, polluting, impure not only in Goa or India but societies and culture Worldwide (Laws, 1990) (Kissling, 1996).

Adolescent girls shared that they use different terms in schools and colleges. They have code language like Happy Birthday, batlifutli/guddifutli (bottle or bottle cap broke), date, Pipe futle (Pipe broke), Chumps (Close companion) to refer to menstruation. This reflects shyness or taboo around the topic of menstruation. Any word or function related to our reproductive organs is not openly been talked about in our society. We have phrases which mostly have negative meaning attached to it. For example, popat (Parrot) for Penis, Paplet (Pomfret) for Vagina are few of the terms which are used in Konkani language among commoners in Goan society.

Constitution of India under Article 17 states that 'Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of untouchability shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law'. But, in reality, we see that women during their periods are considered as untouchables and have to follow various forms of exclusion practices even today. They are not allowed in places of worship, kitchen, religious and social functions. This act of untouchability goes unpunishable, and these practices are going on till today.

Menstrual Exclusion Practices and the Teachings

There are arguments among scholar on whether to term menstrual practices as taboos or etiquettes (Laws, 1990 in Kisslings, 1996). Menstrual pollution as a way of disciplining of the female body in practice has been discussed widely in the literature (Narsimha, 2011).

While criticizing westerners on commenting negatively about menstrual huts, (Baldy, 2016) states "Continued dismissal of indigenous menstrual customs as primitive and/or oppressive of women is built from a settler colonial desire to make Indigenous knowledge obsolete and indigenous ceremonies and cultures primitive remnants of the past."

A Cross-Cultural Study of Menstruation, Menstrual Taboos and related Social Variables' gives a macro level outlook on menstrual taboos around the world in various cultures. It throws light on how menstrual taboos developed. The study says that largely it was due to lack of medical knowledge which made people follow taboos. Since menstruation is related to blood, there was more fear among people. The taboos ranged
from total exclusion of women from house and house related work. There was also fear that flower would wilt, pickle would spoil, cooked food would spoil, etc if touched and prepared by menstruating women. In certain communities, women and men ate separately in fear of getting infected from women. There were also menstruating huts for women to stay during menstruation (Montgomery: 1974).

While referring to three types of menstrual taboos in the US culture, (Kisslings: 1996) (Lisandra Rodriguez White: 2012) discusses concealment taboo (hide about periods), activity taboo (restrictions on physical behaviour) and communication taboo (cannot talk openly about menstruation). Such taboos are practised even in Goa. But in addition to it, there are menstrual exclusion practices which can be put in three categories.

1. Total Exclusion: The woman is not allowed to touch anything or anyone, has to use separate utensils, made to sit in one corner of the house, sleep separately. She is not allowed to enter the kitchen. Her freedom of movement is restricted totally. She has to depend on another person to give her food and sometimes even water.

2. Partial Exclusion: Women are not allowed to worship God. She is refrained from performing any religious duties. She does not participate in any festival or religious functions like naming ceremony, baby showers, Haldi kumkum, Pooja or marriages. She can participate in any other household work like cleaning, washing and cooking.

3. No Exclusion: There are girls who do not follow any exclusion practices. Catholic girls do not follow any religious based restrictions. There were only nine Hindu adolescent girls who said that they do not follow any restrictions which are imposed upon by the religion on them. They enter places of worship and perform religious duties along with other housework.

Among Hindu adolescent respondents, during festivities like Ganesh Chaturthi, the girls who otherwise practice partial exclusion practice total exclusion. The main reason which adolescent girls expressed is that for the Ganesh Chaturthi celebration they go to their native place as it is the main festival among Goan Hindu society. There are also beliefs like if Ganesh idol hears a voice or sees menstruating women, the colour of the idol will fade away. Group of Girls from a college in North Goa expressed that they feel embarrassed when they menstruate during any festival time as whole family members and relatives come to know that she is menstruating. Another reason for fading away of total exclusion to partial exclusion could be the disintegration of the joint family into the nuclear family.
A majority of 127 (85%) said that they do not go to temple during menstruation. 82 (55%) said that they do not cook and don't use any common consumables during menstruation. 78 (52%) said that then do not touch anything at home and sit and sleep separately. They have separate utensils for eating food which is used only during menstruation. The bed sheets and towels are washed after 5 days. They take head bath after their menstruation and eat tulsi leaf.

People who support menstrual exclusion state that these practices are levied on the woman so that she gets rest. But in reality, she has to perform all her housework like drawing water, washing, cleaning and those following partial seclusion also cook. Thus, she might have to work more during her menstruation, and only strict practices which remain is that of seclusion from religious functions and duties.

**Menstrual Education in Formal Education System in Goa**

Menstrual health and hygiene sessions for girls are conducted in schools by school counselors, health counselors, NGOs or other government bodies. Some schools conduct the sessions by themselves as it is part of curricula in 8th and 9th Standard.

**Analysing the High School Textbook on Adolescent Education**

Goa Board introduced sexual reproduction in plants at standard seventh, where they discuss about asexual and sexual reproduction among plants. In the Eighth standard, adolescents are introduced to two lessons, One on 'Reproduction in Animals' and another on 'Reaching the age of Adolescence'. In reproduction in animals lesson, different reproductive parts (male and female) and their functions are discussed in pictorial form. Fertilisation process, development of the embryo, test tube babies are discussed. It is interesting to note that there is no mention of the vagina and also how sexual intercourse takes place. The description seems to be very technical. Also, pubertal changes occur from 9-10 years onwards and curiosity among adolescents and sometimes among children also begins and discussing among reproduction and adolescence changes might
seem late as in eight standard, the child is already 13-14 years of age. There are chances that the child has already learnt about reproduction from various other sources like internet, peers, magazines, television, etc.

This particular lesson of reproduction is given for self-study by many science teachers as shared by the adolescent girls, or they invite persons from NGOs or experts to teach these lesson. There are very few science teachers who are comfortable with discussing such topics with their students in the class.

Reaching the age of adolescence lesson discusses characteristics of adolescents, puberty and related changes that take place in the body as well as mental, intellectual and emotional changes, hormonal changes, menstruation, sex chromosomes, reproductive health, nutrition and personal hygiene topics are touched upon in this chapter. It is good that this lesson is discussed with parents and teachers in length and all doubts among adolescents are cleared. This will avoid dependance on unauthentic sources of information.

Adolescent Education section of science book in standard ninth of Goa Board is non-evaluative. This section is excluded from the exam portion. Thus teacher doesn't feel the need to teach it and is left for self-study. There are two chapters under Adolescent Education. One is on 'Understanding Adolescence' and other on 'Skill Development'. Understanding Adolescent covers defining adolescence and objectives of the adolescent education programme. Different aspects of adolescence like physical, psychological, emotional, socio-cultural, behavioural are discussed in brief in this chapters. Also, the needs of adolescents like nutrition, education, life skills education and concerns of adolescents are discussed. Chapter two on skill development discusses ten life skills in three categories: Thinking skills, social skills and negotiation skills in brief. The formal education system should treat these topics as equally important as when adolescent are well informed about their bodily changes from an authentic source, and also their life skills are developed then this will help them in developing their personalities.

Adolescent Development education in formal schooling is largely based on medical science and ignores the socio-cultural aspect of growing as an adult.

**Role of Government Agencies and Voluntary Organisations in menstrual education**

Government agencies through various departments are disseminating menstrual education among adolescent girls in Goa. Goa Education Development Corporation (GEDC), a semi-government body has school counselor's scheme where school counselors are appointed in government and aided schools and colleges. They conduct sessions in schools on menstrual hygiene. Directorate of Health Services through its RKS Kishor Shakti Yojana scheme has established Yuva clinics where adolescent counselors are appointed who impart menstrual education in community as
well as in schools. Adolescent Education Programme (AEP) of Goa AIDS Control Society (GSACs) is implemented through SCERT where the counselors conduct sessions in schools on sex education, menstrual education and other related topics. Each of the departments have their own module to teach on menstrual education. Social exclusion practices and taboos around menstruation are not dealt with by government departments.

There are several NGOs such as Children Rights in Goa (CRG), EcoFemme, Green the Red, Rotary Clubs, ARZ (Anyay Rahit Zindagi), Sahas, Sangath, Mineral Foundation of Goa, etc who are working with adolescents and menstrual health. Children Rights in Goa (CRG) have helped schools in forming gender champions and conduct training relevant to them. EcoFemme promotes eco-friendly stitched cloth pads and conducts menstrual health management session in rural and urban areas. They also have given ecofemme pads to rural girls for free of cost. ARZ works with adolescent and youth in Vasco and conduct gender sensitization, sex education and other related awareness programmes with the communities and educational educational institutes. Sahas has been conducting gender sensitizations and menstrual health management sessions with rural girls mostly in Sattari taluka. Sangath had conducted intervention based research with adolescent girls and women on menstruation. Mineral Foundation of Goa (MFG) conducts menstrual health management sessions for schools in mining belt of Goa. Rotary Club of Panjim has installed sanitary pad vending machines and incinerators in 75 educational institutes all over Goa.

Through these efforts from government and NGOs towards menstrual health management and hygiene, adolescent girls are receiving knowledge about menstrual health. Each organization follows their own module to teach about menstruation. There is need to also work in the area of helping the adolescents to accept their body and also towards addressing the taboos which are practiced around menstruation in the State. Apart from government and NGOs, there is also contribution of other sources like T.V, Internet and books to learn about menstruation.

**Media, Internet, Books as a source of knowledge for learning about menstruation**

There is lesser influence of T.V, Internet and books to learn about menstruation among adolescent girls respondents. They expressed that they have been watching TV advertisements of sanitary pads which gave them rough idea about menstruation. Through google search some of the adolescent girls seek information when they have irregular periods or cramps. Adolescent girls expressed that they have read science text books and not any other book for accessing knowledge on menstruation.
Menstruation Activism: Towards breaking menstrual taboos in Goa
Since societies across the Globe have considered menstruation much beyond just a biological function, it has given rise to several menstrual activism. The activism is towards breaking silence around menstruation, fighting against menstrual taboos. There are international activists such as Blood Sisters, Society for Menstrual Exclusion (Bobel: 2010). There are national initiatives like Menstrupedia, EcoFemme, Green The Red who works to educate women about menstrual hygiene, environment protection, etc.

In Goa, there is a social movement named SAME: Speak Against Menstrual Exclusion which is started by two young ladies in their 20s in 2014. They started by forming a closed group on Facebook in the same name. They have presently 2000+ members on this group. SAME received support from Chitrangi, women's collective of Konkani Bhasha Mandal who together have gone to more than ten colleges in Goa to speak against menstrual exclusion.

It is interesting to note that most of the active members of the SAME are from higher caste where the practices are more rigid. These females want to break the silence around menstruation and also stop following the social and religious practices which treat women as impure and unclean. They sternly speak about breaking all types of the taboos around menstruation. For adolescent girls who have been following menstrual taboos religiously all these years, this might come as a shock. There might be a dilemma between what has been practiced at home and community and what is heard through sessions conducted by SAME in their colleges.

CONCLUSION
There are several socialization agencies which influence the knowledge creation, perception building and acceptance of one's body and menstruation among adolescent girls in Goa. The primary agencies, i.e. family mainly teaches about menstrual hygiene and menstrual exclusion practices to be followed during menstruation. While secondary agencies like educational institute focus on passing medical science knowledge about menstruation and menstrual hygiene. On the other side, Menstrual Activists in Goa who directly challenge the menstrual exclusion practices, may trigger the minds of adolescent girls on re-thinking the practices they presently follow.

Apart from menstrual hygiene management lessons by both school and family, it is also important to help adolescent girls to accept their body, shun the shame around the topic and help them openly discuss their health concerns with family and teachers. Adolescent girls find it comfortable to discuss such topics with peers or other sources.
REFERENCES


Justice J.S Verma's Report of the Committee on Amendments to the Criminal Law published on 13 January 2013


Website