

Menstrual Stain: A Qualitative Understanding of Stigmas Associated With Menstruation

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Abstract

Menstruation is a biological process which is unique to females yet it has been shrouded by myths and socio-cultural stigmas that relegated women to a secondary position in the society. India being a diverse country too has various social connotations associated with menstruation which over time have had detrimental effect on females' poor emotional, social and psychological well-being. There also exists an educational divide in the awareness related to puberty, reproductive health and menstrual hygiene among girls and women. The current paper seeks to understand the socio-religious and cultural stigmas that exist in society. The paper seeks to explore the stigmas women and girls from Tamil Nadu experience using semi-structures interview analyzed which was analyzed using thematic analysis. The paper is an understanding of the stigmas and taboos that are prevalent in the society and gives a narrative description of females' behavioural and emotional responses to the stigmas.

Keywords: menstruation, stigma, taboo, well-being, puberty

INTRODUCTIONS

Every child enters a stage in life which makes their body potent and capable of reproduction which is known as puberty and it is common for both genders. Menstruation is the major and an inevitable stage of puberty in girls. It is also be one of the biggest physical and physiological transformation which turns a girl into a woman. Menstruation is moreover a natural, biological process that occurs in girls in which the uterus discards the endometrial lining in the form of blood through vagina. Menstruation which is commonly known as periods and menses among teen agers is the regular and periodic discharge of blood that follows as monthly cycle which gets initiated around the age of 10 and continues each month, eventually ends near about 50. Besides the discharge of blood during menstruation are also subjected to various psychological and physical signs and symptoms like mood swings, emotional instability, tired and fatigues, diarrhoea, bloating, abdominal cramps. Young women considers this menstrual cycle as a normal and regular and accept it as a routine and not as any disruptive and only the beliefs about menstruation are mildly complex than previously investigated (Brooks et al., 1977). However teen girls undergo mixed feelings as itbe the fresh and an unexplored period of life.

Stigma- A Quick Rewind

The Greeks originated the term stigma to represent the individuals with physical deformities in the form of cut or

burnt into the body, criminals, a blemished person, they advertised the bearer as a slave, to be avoided, ritually polluted especially in public places. Later during the Christian ages, there occurred two phenomenon one as a holy grace of considering the eruptive blossoms on the skin, the other be the medical allusion of bodily signs of physical disorder. Even today, the term stigma is used to denote the original sense but mostly to denote the disgrace itself than to the bodily evidence. Furthermore, a shift has been taken place around the usage and representing the term stigma. According to Goffman (1963) stigma is an “*attribute that is deeply discrediting.*” Cadell (2020) explains stigma as a negative attitudes or discrimination against someone based on physical disability or an intellectually challenged condition. This can be evidently argued that there is a shift in the definitions in the twentieth century. The negative interpersonal or social attitude that gets attached with an individual as a characteristic which is regarded as a mental or social or physical deficiency is considered as “stigma”. Stigma leaves a mark in a person with discredits to his or her self or social identity. With the advancements of new phenomena’s and cultural practises the social stigma stays without obsoleting in the society within individuals. Social stigma can be related with gender, community, race and religion etc. Stigma produces social inequality mainly due to the hierarchies in the groups and communities (Clair, 2018).

Emergence and Manifestation of Menstruation Stigma

Period stigma or menstrual stigma refers to discrimination, prejudice or any sort of stigmas faced by females who menstruate. Many socio-religious practices across ancient civilizations have considered menstrual blood an abomination, and it was perceived to be unclean with magical properties, while there are few examples of many aboriginal tribes of consider menstruation as powerful and sacred (Rai & Desk, 2019). Period stigma leads to lowered quality of life and social status from physical problems of lack of access to menstrual products to calling out with unfair and shameful terms like “dirty”, “impure” and “unclean” (Resnick, 2021). This stigma surrounding menstruation is furthermore exemplified by the socio-cultural connotations that exists for the terms: “time of the month” “aunt flow” etc. And using a plethora of different names to periods clearly manifests how we don’t like discussing about periods or debunking the myths related to it.

Menstrual Taboos in India

In Hindus, especially in the South Indian Hindu culture, a girl who attained her first menarche is pampered and soothed well, almost celebrated by having a ceremony where her friends and relatives are invited, bestowed with gifts and blessings, but these girls also have to practice some restrictions which is a miserable fact that how first menarche is celebrated and later she is subjected to prohibition from social events and rituals. There have been cases in India where women have been prohibited from entering temples of male Gods because of menstruation and fear of contamination of the premise (Kumari, 2019). In Islam, menstruating women must be excluded from Ramadhan fasting, sexual intercourse is not permissible for husbands with their wife during the menstruation days. Whereas in orthodox Christianity also, menstruating women and girls are considered impure and exempted from the religious rituals. Menstruation is bounded by the socio-religious connotations based on the historical myths, philosophies, Vedas, and the other holy scriptures of each and every religion.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

The prime focus of the study was to describe and understand detailed accounts of participants’ experiences of the menstruation related stigmas that exist in society a narrative approach was used which can help one to get a deeper knowledge of a person’s lived experience. For this reason, the study used an empirical phenomenological method to qualitatively analyze the feelings and experience of participants and to find common patterns among them. In-person interviews with the participants were carried out.

According to (Aspers & Corte, 2019) qualitative research is a iterative process in which an improved understanding of scientific community by the distinctions resulted from closer application of the phenomenon studied.

Research Objectives

1. To enumerate the existing stigmas oriented to menstruation and menstruation experiences in the family and

societal settings which are rooted from religious and cultural backgrounds.

2. To uncover the actual degree or extent to which the stigmas and stereotypes have been imbibed into the society especially in the well-educated and financially well-settled families in city.
3. To study the entire experiences (emotional, physical and behavioral) of the menstruating females.

Participants

A purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants for this study. For this purpose a total of 15 individuals meeting the inclusion criteria (experience of menstruation, lived in urban domicile and spoke English, belonging to the Coimbatore city) were contacted and were explained the purpose of this study. Out of these, 6 individuals who consented to participate in the study were selected.

The age of the participants ranged from 15 to 48 years. Out of the 6 participants 2 were working, and 4 are students. The participants all belong to joint families and are practicing Hindus. All the participants belonged to Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

To obtain a deeper understanding of women's experiences of the menstruation related stigmas that exist in society a narrative approach was used which can help one to get a deeper knowledge of a person's lived experience (Reissman, 2008). Thematic analysis was used for reporting patterns within the data and helped in organizing the data in great detail. (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed on the basis of review of relevant literature on past and present pandemics. Since the main objective of the study was to understand participants' lived experiences of the menstrual stigmas, the order and number of questions were left unstructured and were to be decided by the interviewer according to the flow of the interview. Also, the interviewer had the freedom to ask some probe questions, if needed to capture the richness of participants' experience, not already included in the interview protocol.

Data Collection

After identifying the potential participants for the study, the participants were contacted in-person to explain the purpose and the importance of the study. They were also informed about the ethical protocol and data anonymity measures being followed. The participants' questions and concerns were carefully noted and addressed. After the participants consented to take part in the study and to record the interview, a suitable time of their convenience was decided. The semi-structured, in-depth interviews were done with the participants in-person and the same were recorded using the voice recorder. Immediately after the recording the audio file was anonymously coded and it was ensured that the audio recording did not contain any identifiable information about the participant. The time taken for the interviews ranged between 30 to 45 min. It was pre-decided that in case of the participant displaying any psychological/emotional problem during the interview, it would be discontinued and adequate psychological/emotional help would be provided to prevent any psychological harm to the participants. However, no such incidence took place during the entire data-collection process.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method by both the authors. The steps of thematic analysis includes:

1. Familiarization: reading the data to ensure precision and transcription
2. Generating initial codes: organizing data into initial codes
3. Search for Themes: analysis of codes and how to combine them
4. Reviewing themes: meaningful arrangement of data in themes
5. Defining themes

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Subject 1:

Subject 1 is 15 years old living in Coimbatore. She and her family are Hindus. She experienced menarche when she was in class 7 at the age of 12. She felt very anxious and sad as starting her menstrual cycle meant she was supposed to behave like a lady from then onwards. Her family was very happy to hear the news and they celebrated it. Her parent pamper her during menstrual cycle but she feels highly uncomfortable during the time both physically and emotionally due to mood disturbances. The subject has never felt shy to discuss the issues of menstruation at home. She has experienced religious stigmas related to menstruation where she has not been allowed to offer prayer or enter prayer room during her menstrual cycle.

Table 1: Subject 1

Themes	Sub Themes	Narrative Account
Social and Religious Taboos	Restrictions, strict rituals	<p>“I pray every day but during that time I have temple restrictions and puja room restrictions. I do not pray, put a Kumkum on my forehead, and do not enter the Pooja room.”</p> <p>“Most often especially in smaller petty shops napkins are sold by wrapping it in a black polythene which is awkward”</p>
Menstrual Experiences-Behavioural Stigma	Special terms for referring to menstrual cycle, restricted physically to do tasks	<p>“Do not run and play, and store napkin only in toilet”</p> <p>“I call it three or red alert so that no body guesses”</p>
Menstrual Experiences- Emotional and Physical Stigma	Emotion of confusion regarding stigma Comfortable in talking about menstruation	<p>I strictly follow as was instructed to me from the beginning. But I wondered “why”</p> <p>“I Am very much comfortable and never felt shyness to talk about anything related to menstruation, pain, and menstrual products”</p>

Subject 2

Subject 2 is 19 years old and lives in Coimbatore. She attained menarche at the age of 11 and her family was very happy to hear about it. During the cycle she experiences physical discomfort and lower back pain. When she attained menarche, her family celebrated and brought her gifts. While watching television she has experienced embarrassing moments whenever advertisements about menstrual products come up. She has faced restrictions with respect to going to temple, and offering prayers during menstrual cycle.

Table 2: Subject 2

Themes	Sub Themes	Narrative Account
Social and Religious Taboos	Restrictions, strict rituals	<p>“usual instructions like should not go to temple, should not keep the holy powder in forehead.”</p>
Menstrual Experiences-Behavioural Stigma	Special terms for referring to menstrual cycle, restricted physically to do tasks	<p>“I personally have a habit of taking a hair wash during the first and last day of my periods.”</p> <p>“I call it date”</p>
Menstrual Experiences- Emotional and Physical Stigma	Emotion awkwardness and embarrassment	<p>The advertisements of the napkins have doubled with the frequency, one incident I remember is when I was showing a YouTube video to my uncle suddenly the ad popped out and I couldn't skip it also, which</p>

		created embarrassing moments, similarly when I go to my aunt's house for vacation while watching tv those advertisements beings an awkward expressions in their face which in turn gives embarrassment to me.
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Subject 3:

Subject 3, who is 21 years now, attained her menarche at the age of 11. Her parents were very excited when they heard the news. She is prohibited to enter prayer room and there are some more behavioural restrictions on her.

Table 3: Subject 3

Themes	Sub Themes	Narrative Account
Social and Religious Taboos	Restrictions, misconstrued facts	"According to my mom's tradition I should not enter kitchen and pooja room but nowadays they aren't strict about it. And my mom believes that by default I will be sick during my periods." it's the bad blood (waste material) leaves out our body.
Menstrual Stigma Experiences-Behavioural	Special terms for referring to menstrual cycle, restricted physically to do certain tasks, difference in acceptance towards menstruation as a normal phenomenon in society	Even today my granny and my mom doesn't allow me to go out without dupatta during menstruation, and no jeans and no light color dresses other than that during my childhood I faced the scenario of getting napkins in a black polythene, but now its existing only in the smaller petty shops not in the department stores and stores in the malls "I call it date or red"
Menstrual Stigma Experiences and Awareness-Emotional and Physical	Discomfort	"Not very comfortable sharing much with my mom as she criticizes a lot on menstruation" "My cousin sister is strictly asked to wear only salwar with shawl after she attained menarche. Do not play with kids"

Subject 4:

A 21 year old subject 4 experienced first menstruation at the age of 14. She was relieved to experienced it as she had been told she was last amongst the cousins to attain menarche. Her family was also happy and celebrated the event. She does not feel any discomfort during her cycle either physical or emotionally. But she is not allowed to be part of religious ceremonies or enter temple. She is also not allowed to buy sanitary napkins along with any other household products.

Table 4: Subject 4

Themes	Sub Themes	Narrative Account
Social and Religious Taboos	Restrictions, misconstrued facts	"I should strictly follow the religious rituals like should not go to temple for all the 5 days. Should not touch the god statues, pooja materials, bhajan books, should not eat non-veg, fried items."
Menstrual Stigma Experiences-Behavioural	Special terms for referring to menstrual cycle, hiding sanitary products	I get my napkins I should bill it separately or cover it separately from the other products. I should not buy it along with the other groceries or other while getting other products. "I call it date or red" During school days we use terms like Red falls, Flow, Chums.
Menstrual Stigma	Discomfort and ill at ease	

Experiences- Emotional and Physical		
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Subject 5:

48 years old subject 5 attained her first menstrual cycle at the age of 13 years. Her family was very happy as because she’s the only child in home, they were awaiting to celebrate it in a bigger way. When she was at school, it wasn’t considered comfortable to discuss issues of menstruation and also used cloth for a sanitary napkin. Now she orders sanitary products online. She experienced religious restrictions in her childhood at village, but in her marital home in the city she does not experience any such restrictions.

Table 5: Subject 5

Themes	Sub Themes	Narrative Account
Social and Religious Taboos	Restrictions, misconstrued facts	“Actually after marriage I got to shift to a city. There in my hometown, a village I had a lot of problems from getting napkins to abiding the rules of not entering kitchen, puja room, not going out, experiencing untouchability etc. but now in my husband’s family I’m not encountering in such stigmas.”
Menstrual Stigma Experiences-Behavioural	Special terms for referring to menstrual cycle, hiding sanitary products	
Menstrual Stigma Experiences- Emotional and Physical	Discomfort experienced due to restriction	

Subject 6

34 years old subject 6 attained her puberty at the age of 12. She used to live in village in her childhood and there were restrictions related to entering temples and prayer spaces and was not allowed to step out of her house. She has experienced less stigmas related to menstruation in the city as compared to rural area where she grew up.

Table 6: Subject 6

Themes	Sub Themes	Narrative Account
Social and Religious Taboos	Restrictions both social and religious	“I have restrictions in food, entering temple, taking part in family functions, and ceremonies.” “I personally feel that currently I’m experiencing low level of stigmas in the city where I live now while compared to where I was born and brought up.”

Menstrual Stigma Experiences-Behavioural	Physical restrictions	<p>“Mostly they didn’t allow me to go to school, and I should not touch anyone or step out of my house, and the cotton must be wrapped in paper and disposed and the clothes I remember they collecting it together and burning it altogether in the outskirts.”</p> <p>I generally apply turmeric and bath do not use soaps for bathing and take bath before going to bed.</p>
Menstrual Stigma Experiences and Awareness-Emotional and Physical	Prominence of stigmas in rural areas	<p>“Even today the village near to my hometown, has severe restriction to enter temple, and the menstruating girls and women must sleep outside the living room, not allowing them to cook, pray and go somewhere out.”</p>

DISCUSSION

As seen above, every subject has different experiences related to menstruation and stigmas related to it. They all have experienced menstrual stigmas at various levels: religious, social, behavioural and emotional levels. Menarche is considered a major biological event in a female’s life that changes her status from being a child to a woman (Hossain & Sen, 2017). Menarche usually occurs anytime between less than 10 years of age to around 16 years of age. Although it is a biological cycle, it has many psycho-socio-cultural connotations associated with it (Rembeck et al., 2006).

Women across cultures have been encouraged by culture and religion to avoid certain activities such as cooking, working, praying and having sexual intercourse while menstruating, as they are considered to be in a state of uncleanliness (Buckley & Gottlieb, 1988). Over time women have been socialized and conditioned to believe that their bodies are unclean and dirty as compared to the men, which has led to shame and stigma over the years (Northrup, 2010). Many women have adopted the notion that they become impure and dirty during menstrual cycle and they act out the stigmas and practice the restrictions (Singh, 2006).

This paper discusses some crucial themes related to menstruation viz. social and religious stigma, behavioural experiences of menstrual stigma, emotional experiences of stigma, awareness of stigma.

All the subjects have experienced some common social and religious stigmas during their menstrual cycle. In a diverse country like India there are different meanings associated with menstruation and one perception that persists is that of impurity of menstrual blood (Holkar, 2015). As Subject 3 has expressed that she was taught that menstrual blood is bad blood and hence it is considered dirty. This thinking is followed by treating the biological phenomenon as a taboo. Women are conditioned into thinking that their bodies are unclean during their menstrual cycle and various prohibitions are imposed on them. According to Chawla (1994) women are prohibited from going into all religious complexes like temples, mosques, and gurudwaras and they are not allowed to touch sacred scriptures. All the subjects have expressed that they aren’t allowed in kitchen and prayer rooms as well as temples or other places of worship where auspicious rituals are held. The women are prohibited to touch some specific foods, symbols of worship and even pickles out of fear that they will be spoiled even when there is no scientific explanation to it (Deswal, 2020). The women also have to follow some specific dietary restrictions out of the fear of spoiling the food (Puri & Kapoor, 2006).

The use of the word menstruation is in itself a taboo subject and causes tension any time it is mentioned in a social setup. As subject-3 states from her experience *“The advertisements of the napkins have doubled with the frequency, one incident I remember is when I was showing a YouTube video to my uncle suddenly the ad popped out and I couldn’t skip it also, which created embarrassing moments, and when I go to my aunt’s house for vacation while watching tv those advertisements beings an awkward expressions in their face which in turn gives embarrassment to me.”*

Menstrual products related advertisement that dare to centre conversations around the tabooed subject face a backlash from public and must be kept secret and not talked about openly (Watson, 2021). The commercials also make an effort to show blue liquid in sanitary products add so that it doesn’t cause families watching TV together to cringe, which is in itself a food for thought that why would there be such a taboo about discussing or less watching an advertisement about something that is so mundane, so uncomfortable for families? According to Williamson (1978) advertising teaches us not only about the product but what it stands for or what is being depicted. Hence the female menstrual products and how they are advertised can be a powerful way of destigmatizing the concepts around the subject. As Merskin (1999) rightly observes that advertisers use allegorical images of heart and flowers in pinks and purples to keep it hidden. Now leading the change many brands are displaying red instead of blue liquid in their advertisement for sanitary products which is one, not misleading to young girls and second, can help remove the stigma and mystery associated with a monthly cycle.

Advertisements also lead to unusual practice of hushing the topic of menstruation in public too. As Subject-1 states *“Most often especially in smaller petty shops napkins are sold by wrapping it in a black polythene which is awkward.”* An average woman in India is in psychological distress while asking the shopkeeper for menstrual products which is then wrapped in newspapers and black polythene to hide the detested thing the woman is carrying (Basak, 2020). This furthers the issue of stigma and women continue to be embarrassed of their biological cycles (Patel, 2018).

Women and girls also abstain from calling menstruation by its name out of embarrassment and thus there are various euphemisms to refer to it like Aunt Flo, three, red alert, red falls, chums and flow. There are around 5000 slang words that are used to denote menstruation around the world (O’Conner, 2016) According to Druet (2021), the euphemisms allow women to talk about menstruation and also conditions them into understanding that menstruation is supposed to be secret and thus reinforcing the taboos associated with it.

Some subjects in the study also experienced the rural-urban divide in terms of restrictions and practices during their menstrual cycle. To quote Subject-6 *“I personally feel that currently I’m experiencing low level of stigmas in the city where I live now while compared to where I was born and brought up.”* According to Paria, Bhattacharya & Das (2014) rural girls practice more restrictions than urban girls during menstrual phase due to lack of education and awareness of the physiological mechanisms. The stigmas associated with menstruation has many consequences for their well-being and emotional health. The stigmas are a way of reiterating the status of women in society.

CONCLUSION

Stigma associated with menstruation has been detrimental to mental and physical health of women. Menstrual stigmas reinforce secondary status of women in the society. . It is a stigma that women go to lengths to carry forward by keeping it hidden as they are conditioned to manoeuvre in secret during their menstrual cycle (Oxley, 1998). But with the advent of social media the discussions of menstruation have been constantly increasing, and women and men have come up in protest to do away with the stigmatization of menstruation and to spread awareness about the physiological process and socio-cultural taboos.

One limitation of this paper is that the collection of data could only be done online owing to the social distancing rules in practice, for future a large data could be gathered to understand the issue in more detail.

The future direction of the reserach can be to understand regional differences in stigma associated with menstruation and also to highlight the practice in some subcultures where menstruation is celebrated. The research can also be done to highlight the rural and urban divide in the practice of taboos and a meta analysis of the efforts being taken up by various NGOs, social media and social change-makers. Future research can also seek to work on the straetgies to combat the stigmas that exist and also to enhance awareness related to menstrual health.

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