

Menstruation: An update on the need to educate the Indian Women

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Menstruation is a natural part of the reproductive cycle, but it has been surrounded by myths and taboos in many cultures, including India. Traditional beliefs have linked menstruation with impurity and led to discrimination against menstruating women. There is an urgent need to educate women and increase awareness and cultural beliefs. This can be achieved through public health initiatives, increased education, and using social media as a platform for women to share their experiences.

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"Beyond the stigma, lies a force of creation, a symbol of womanhood, a testament to our strength."

Menstruation is a natural part of the reproductive cycle during which bleeding occurs due to the shedding of the uterine membrane. Women have varying perceptions of menstruation - some view it as a necessary evil, and others perceive it as a symbol of womanhood.

¹ At the same time, some feel it unnecessarily disrupts social, religious, and professional life.¹

Throughout history, menstruation has been shrouded in myths and taboos in many cultures, including India. These beliefs often originate from religious, social, and cultural influences. In India, traditional beliefs have frequently linked menstruation with impurity, uncleanness, and spiritual pollution.^{2,3} As a result, various restrictions and practices are imposed on menstruating women. Menstrual taboos have resulted in the marginalization of women and girls in various social and cultural spheres. While certain taboos might be perceived as protective measures, others can lead to detrimental effects.^{2,3}

In the context of Indian culture, menstruating women often encounter discrimination, which manifests as exclusion from social gatherings and religious activities, restrictions on accessing temples and shrines, and limitations on participation in culinary spaces.

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Nevertheless, the rise of social media in recent years has empowered women to share their experiences related to menstruation, thereby increasing awareness and understanding of the issue.⁴

Out of the Various Myths related to menstruation, below mentioned are the major ones:

Impurity

Historically, menstruating women have been regarded as impure, leading to restrictions on their access to religious sites, kitchens, and interactions with specific individuals. This perspective traces back to Vedic traditions and is linked to the mythological narrative of Indra's defeat of Vritras. The Vedas suggest that the guilt associated with the slaying of a brahmana manifests monthly as menstrual flow, implying that women are burdened with Indra's guilt.⁵ Alarming, contemporary evidence shows that approximately 40 percent of girls in India still perceive menstrual blood as unclean.⁶ Notably, in September 2018, the Supreme Court of India overturned a prohibition that barred menstruating women and girls (aged ten to fifty) from entering the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala, India (Indian Young Lawyers Association & Ors. v. The State of Kerala & Ors, S.C.C. 1 [2018]).⁷

Isolation

During menstruation, women have often been subjected to isolation measures intended to shield others from

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perceived “impurity.” In urban areas, women were frequently prohibited from entering puja rooms, while in rural contexts, they were often barred from kitchens.⁸ Certain myths propagate the belief that if a menstruating girl touches particular foods, those items will spoil. However, research conducted in Delhi indicated that 85 percent of girls believed food remained unspoiled by such contact, while 15 percent disagreed. Cultural customs and religious prohibitions surrounding menstruation are often shaped by traditional beliefs involving malevolent spirits, along with societal feelings of shame linked to reproductive health.⁹

- **Dietary Restrictions** Traditionally, there have been beliefs asserting that certain foods are harmful or impure for menstruating women. Specific items, such as pickles, were thought to interfere with menstrual flow.¹⁰
- **Social Restrictions:** Women were also excluded from social gatherings and certain activities, including physical exercise. Nevertheless, it is recognized that physical activity and exercise can enhance the production of neurotransmitters and “feel-good” hormones, thereby improving mood and overall health.¹¹

The research indicates that cultural and social perceptions of menstruation are influenced by various factors, including the level of girls’ education, their attitudes, the family environment, and the prevailing cultural background and beliefs.¹²

There is an urgent need to educate women about the Menstruation and burst the Myths. In India, various challenges are being faced by Indian women while dealing with Menstruation:

Increased disease risk

In India, approximately 70% of reproductive health issues are attributed to inadequate menstrual hygiene practices. Many women utilize unclean rags in place of sanitary napkins, and even when these rags are washed, they may still harbour bacteria if not adequately dried.

Societal stigma

Menstruation is often subject to social taboo in India, with women frequently labelled as “impure” during their menstrual cycle. This stigma results in their social isolation from family during meals, religious prayers, and other communal activities.

Economic barriers to sanitation

The financial burden associated with menstrual products significantly contributes to period poverty in India.

An estimated 70.62 million individuals live in extreme poverty, subsisting on \$1.90 per day. The average cost for menstrual products for an Indian woman is about 300 rupees (\$4.20) monthly, which can be prohibitive for families with low incomes.

Educational impact¹³

Period poverty adversely affects educational attainment in India. On average, girls miss about six days of school each month due to the associated stigma surrounding menstruation. This contributes to the high annual dropout rate of approximately 23% among girls. Those who discontinue their education often encounter limited employment prospects and a higher likelihood of early marriage.

The current study reveals a lack of knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding menstruation hygiene among adolescent school girls, along with prevalent misconceptions identified in a pre-test.¹⁴ The health education intervention significantly improved their knowledge and practices.¹⁴ In light of the negative effects of improper menstrual hygiene and existing community misconceptions, it is crucial to implement effective strategies to promote safe practices among adolescent girls. A structured health education program should be provided in schools and communities. Additionally, it is essential to ensure that mothers possess accurate knowledge and positive attitudes about menstruation before these programs are introduced.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to increase education, particularly among women. This has led to a better understanding of menstruation and its biological processes. A significant percentage, specifically 61%, of females reported a lack of prior awareness regarding the onset of menarche.⁶ Further, taking the Public Health Initiatives with the Government and Non-Governmental organisations will also help in providing better care to the women in India. Two more initiatives which can help are an Increase in social media and advocacy by providing a platform for women to discuss their views and experiences and a shift in cultural beliefs.

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