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PERCEPTION AND PRACTICES OF MENSTRUAL TABOOS AMONG ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN URBAN SETTING OF LALITPUR: A MIXED-METHOD STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation, a natural phenomenon experienced by more than half the world's population, is profoundly shaped by social norms, cultural beliefs and gendered practices. In Nepal, menstruation equates to ritual impurity. Although menstrual rituals are present throughout the country in many forms, academic research on the issue has mostly focused on the *Chhaupadi Pratha*. This research aims to identify the menstrual taboos prevalent among adolescent girls in a metropolitan area and trace the reasons for their existence. A mixed-method study was conducted in one private and one public school in Lalitpur. A survey was used to collect the quantitative data among 400 students which were analyzed with IBM SPSS 20. One focus group discussion was then held in each school to collect the qualitative insights. Thematic analysis was applied and responses are presented verbatim. Results revealed that 75.3% of the participants practice menstrual restrictions every month. The longevity of such customs is rooted in the masking of patriarchal expectations as cultural norms, the narrative of menstruation as an issue that only concerns heterosexual women, generational reinforcement of menstrual stigma, lack of women's agency and women's self-objectification. Although reproductive health education plays an important role in changing perceptions, the elimination of menstrual taboos requires multi-level interventions that begin at home.

Keywords: Menstrual rituals, ritual impurity, reproductive health education

INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is the monthly shedding of the uterus lining and blood through the vagina when pregnancy does not occur. Different social groups maintain varying interpretations of menstruation, which depend on their biological, psychological, environmental and social conditions (Sanchez *et al.*, 2012). Kalash women in Pakistan's Chitral district, for instance, have separate buildings for menstrual seclusion called the bashaleni (or bashali) and consider it a time for rest and reflection. Similarly, halakha (Jewish code of law) outlines strict restrictions for menstruating women (Bhartiya, 2013). In contrast, contemporary Nordic societies have no seclusion practices and instead hold public discourses that emphasize menstrual health, rights and dignity.

In many parts of Nepal, menstruating women are banished to a makeshift hut or livestock shed. This practice, known as the *Chhaupadi pratha*, is mostly prevalent in the Far-Western Development Region and some parts of the Mid-Western Development Region, particularly Achham, Bajura, Kailali, Doti and Bajhang (Upadhyay, 2017). The term is derived from two words: "*chhau*" meaning menstruation and "*padi*" meaning women (Amatya *et al.*, 2018). The consequences of the *Chhaupadi* tradition have proven to be life-threatening. There have been reports of women getting raped and assaulted, being bitten by snakes or attacked by wild animals and developing health problems while staying in the menstrual hut. In addition to this, children who go into menstrual exile with their mothers are equally exposed to risk. In 2019, a woman and her two sons asphyxiated after burning firewood to keep warm in a windowless menstrual shed (Shah, 2019). In the same year, a report released by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) stated that there had been 18 reported cases of women dying in *chhau* sheds, with 13 deaths reported in Achham since 2005 (Rai, 2019).

The Supreme Court of Nepal has introduced many initiatives for the elimination of menstrual restrictions. In 2010, the National Plan Against Gender-Based Violence in Nepal recognized *Chhaupadi pratha* as a form of violence against women. In 2017, with implementation beginning in August 2018, the Parliament of Nepal passed the Criminal Code 2074 BS, which criminalized the practice with a fine of Rs.300 (25 USD) and/or a three-month jail sentence for forcing any woman to live in a menstrual

hut. In 2018, the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare (currently known as the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens) implemented the *Chhaupadi pratha* Elimination Drive (*Consideration of Reports Submitted by States Parties under Article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, 2009).

However, the abolition of the *Chhaupadi pratha* has not been possible. Many religious and ethnic groups outline isolation and ritual cleansing for menstruating women. Rishi Panchami, a prominent Hindu festival, is observed on the fifth day of Bhadra (August/September) every year. It is based on the belief that women who have sinned during menstruation will be forgiven if they worship and observe fast in the name of the *Saptarishi* (seven prominent sages). Additionally, academic studies within Nepal have mostly focused on the *Chhaupadi pratha*. Urban areas, where age-old traditions are covert, have not been explored. This mixed-method research aims to explore the perceptions and practices of menstrual taboos among adolescent girls in an urban setting and determine the possible reasons for their existence.

METHOD

Research Context

The study was carried out in two schools within Lalitpur Metropolitan City. In Nepal, Comprehensive Sexuality Education is incorporated at the secondary level through the subject Environment, Health and Population (EHP). Textbooks prescribed by the Curriculum Development Center include chapters on human physiology, sexuality, STDs/STIs, family planning and safe motherhood. Both of the schools taught CSE at the secondary level, conducted workshops about menstruation, ensured the availability of menstrual hygiene facilities and had a nurse to assist students.

Research Design

The research adopted a mixed-method design using a sequential explanatory approach. Quantitative data were collected through a close-ended, self-administered questionnaire, which focused on prevailing menstrual restrictions among adolescent girls. Subsequently, one focus group discussion was conducted in each school to gather the qualitative data. Findings from both phases were combined to form the overall analysis of the study.

Population and Sampling

The research was conducted among 400 adolescent girls with 200 from St. Xavier's School, Jawalakhel, a private and 200 from Tri-Padma Vidyashram Secondary School, a public academic institution, respectively. The respondents ranged from 11 to 21 years of age. Stratified samplings were used to carry out the questionnaire, which was conducted among all 400 respondents. For the FGDs, 11 girls were randomly selected from the total sample size: six participants from St. Xavier's and five from Tri-Padma School.

Nature and Sources of Data Collection

The questionnaire consisted of 44 questions in total, with 11 on a Likert scale. It was divided into three sections:

- i. Section A included questions related to the demographic background of the participants and their familiarity with the research topic;
- ii. Section B included questions related to the everyday experience of menstruation at home, at school and in public;
- iii. Section C included questions on what menstrual taboos are followed by the participants.

The questions were in a single-choice format, except for the 20th and the 40th questions, which were multiple-choice. Each questionnaire required 8-10 minutes to be completed. All 400 questionnaires were filled on time, with no missing responses. The FGD was conducted with nine guiding questions and further questions were added based on the participants' responses. The FGD at Tri-Padma School lasted for 45 minutes in total while the one at St. Xavier's School lasted for an hour. The audio was recorded by a mobile phone and later transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and quantified onto IBM SPSS 20. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data, which were subjected to frequency counts. The results have been presented in bar graphs. Qualitative data from the FGD were reviewed, categorized and trimmed. Since the interaction was carried out in English, instances where Nepali words or phrases were used were transcribed verbatim and presented in Roman script. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Since a majority of the participants were minors, ethical considerations remained central to this study. Ethical approval was received from The Central Department of Sociology, Tribhuvan University. A pilot study was conducted in both schools. Participation in the research was voluntary and the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants have well maintained. During the data collection, the researcher was accompanied by the school coordinator and teachers. The students were briefed about the purpose of the research, provided with the necessary instructions and no identifiers linking the participants have been disclosed.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Despite the high level of participant engagement, the study faced several limitations. Data collection was constrained by time as it was carried out during school hours. Further, as the research focused only on girls, the experiences of all menstruators have not been captured by this study. Additionally, some schools approached during the pilot study did not have enough female students to meet the target of the study sample. Due to this, the research was limited to two schools in Lalitpur and the findings may not be generalized to urban contexts across the country.

Due to time constraint, participants from one private and one public school were involved in the in-depth interview. Moreover the schools of Kathmandu and Lalitpur, both in Kathmandu valley were selected for this research project.

RESULTS

Social and Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

The study participants consisted of students from classes 8, 9 and 10. They were between the ages of 11 to 21. A majority were Hindus with (80.5%) while the least number of participants were Sikh with (0.3%) and Atheist with (0.3%). Among them, 29.8% of the participants were Brahmin, 18.8% Newar and 17.8% Chhetris, thus forming the three largest caste-ethnic groups. In contrast, the Mukhiya and Puri communities formed the lowest groups at 0.3% each. Since a majority of the study participants were Hindus and belonged to ethnic and cultural communities that are known to outline restrictions for menstruating women, it resulted in the findings consisting of varied experiences of menstrual rituals.

Knowledge and Management of Menstrual Hygiene

The mean age at which the participants began their menstrual cycle was 11.83 years. Among them, 91.3% had prior knowledge about menstruation before menarche. The role of mothers was observed to be significant during menstruation. At the same point, 53% of the participants learned about menstruation from their mothers before they did in school or through social media. Similarly, 79.5% of them were guided by their mother during their first menstrual cycle.

Disposable sanitary pads were the most popular choice of menstrual hygiene products (MHPs). Among these participants 94.5% of girls preferred them over reusable cloths (3.8%), menstrual cups (1%) or tampons (0.8%). Likewise, 41.3% of the participants buy MHPs from pharmacies, 33% from local shops, and 24.8% from department stores, and 1% of the participants using homemade MHPs.

Both schools were observed to be well-equipped with menstrual hygiene facilities. Among them, 90% of the participants affirm that they have access to MHPs in school. There were clean washrooms for female students, and a nurse was present in each school. Although school absenteeism during menstruation has been reported in other studies, the findings of this study do not hint at similar results.

However, participants indicate certain shortcomings. Participants mentioned how the locks in washrooms were not secure. Dustbins for disposing used sanitary pads were not properly arranged. In both schools, female students of classes 4 and 5 were provided with an annual workshop about menstruation. Male students were not included and no other workshops on reproductive health were provided for them. Although the school curriculum includes chapters on menstrual and reproductive health, participants shared their dissatisfaction over how lightly the topic is taken. In regular classes, the chapters were either skimmed over or skipped altogether. Male students disturbed and teased the teachers during lessons. This led to instructors often leaving the chapter incomplete till the end of the term and asking students to study it by themselves. Participants, thus, relied on the Internet for information, particularly social media websites like Tik Tok, without cross-checking the data.

Further, students shared that the response of the school nurse often felt discouraging:

It (the pad available at school) is a small one that's rolled in a newspaper. It seems very unhygienic. The nurse scolds us for not carrying pads ourselves and asking for them in the infirmary. So, most girls end up asking their friends instead.

Students who suffer from intense period cramps were prohibited from taking painkillers. Often, they are told because "*pacchi gahro huncha*" (the pills would cause complications later) "*aama banna gahro huncha*" (the pills would make it difficult for them to conceive). However, they have never been explained why this might happen, causing more confusion. Participants also struggled with being very self-conscious about staining their clothes during menstruation which kept them from focusing in class or participating in sports.

Practices of Menstrual Restrictions and Taboo

"Menstruation" was substituted with various euphemisms in everyday conversations. Among them, 71% of the participants said that they use "code words" to refer to the phenomenon. These included terms like "*nachuni bhako*" (cannot be touched), "*menes bhako*" (had "menes", which is short for menstruation), "*para sareko*" ("*para*" = far and "*sareko*" = moved away) or "*chhui bhako*" (unable to be touched) or the Newari term "*ma-jiu bhako*" (cannot be touched).

Seclusion rituals dictated for menstruating women began at menarche. 61% of the participants practiced seclusion during menarche. The average number of days that they stayed in isolation was 7.15 days. Participants were placed in isolation either in their own homes or those of their relatives during this time. Although monthly seclusion rituals did not cause school absenteeism, participants missed up to 7 days of school because of seclusion rituals at menarche.

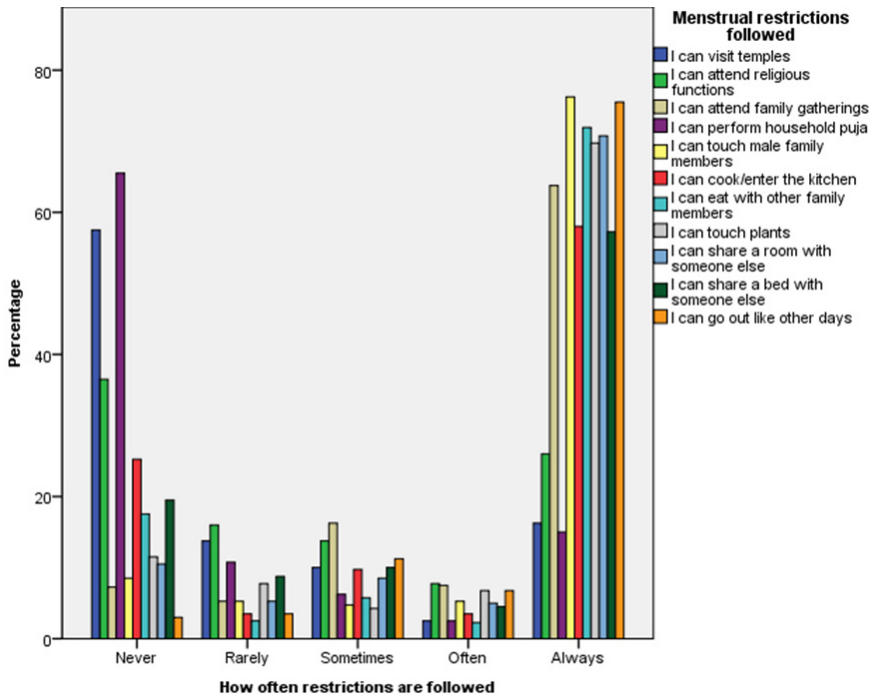
It is found that 75.3% of the participants followed menstrual restrictions every month, with an average of 3.31 days of seclusion. Ritual cleansing was carried out by most participants with 81.5% on the last day of isolation. This included taking a bath, changing of bedsheets and other items used during seclusion before being able to touch "*bhancha ko paani*"

(water in the kitchen) or enter the *puja kotha* (prayer room). However, religious and cultural functions were generally attended after a week.

Figure 1 shows menstrual restrictions that are followed most often. The responses were obtained through a Likert scale. It can be observed that cultural and religious practices related to menstruation, such as performing *puja* or visiting temples and those within the household have the most rigidity. On the contrary, the most lenient practices are those to do with activities outside the household. Though women are culturally not allowed to touch male members of the family, especially those who have performed the initiation ritual called *bratabanda*, this restriction is observed to have the most leniency.

Figure 1

Menstrual restrictions and how often they're followed



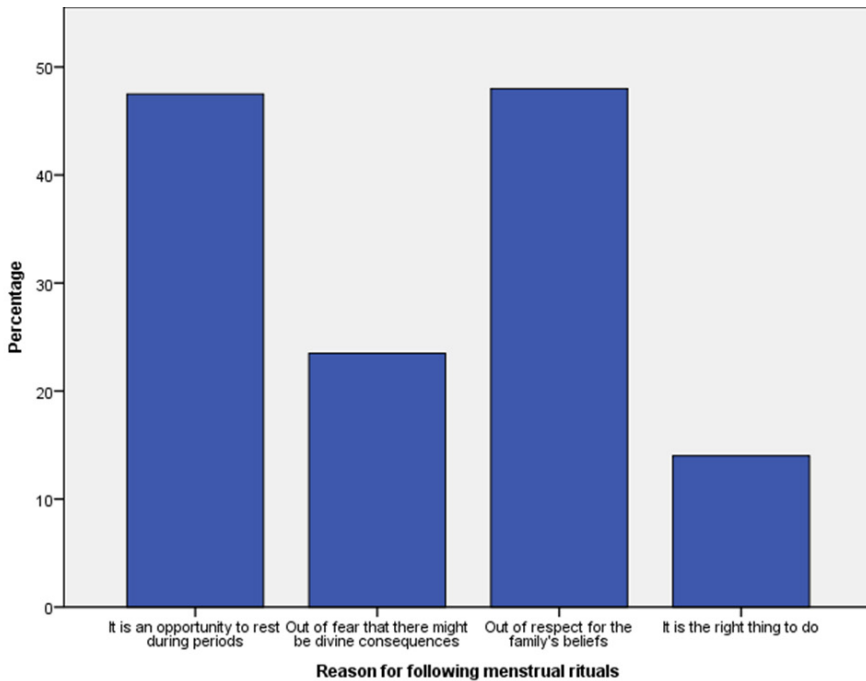
Menstrual restrictions were passed down through verbal instructions by female family members. Participants shared how female relatives asked them about their menstrual status when they attended religious family

functions. In contrast, male family members did not participate in the discourse. Few, however, were very supportive.

“Dada (elder brother) and I share a birthday. We always visit Pashupatinath on our birthday. One year, I was on my periods on my birthday. Mamu (mother) said that she should only take dada to the temple but not me. He objected and said that it is such a normal thing to have periods, it happens to every woman, so why should I not be allowed to go with them? Although mamu did not listen, he stood up for me.”

Figure 2

Reason for following menstrual rituals



In a multiple-choice question, participants were asked to select reasons why they adhered to menstrual rituals. Figure 2 represents the response of the participants who largely agreed to adhere to rituals out of respect for the family’s beliefs (48%) or because they believed that it was an opportunity to rest during periods (47.5%). In spite of the challenges, participants were hopeful for change. When asked if they would challenge

menstrual restrictions at home or in the community in the future, the response was positive.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Menstruation is a phenomenon which has been studied since the yesteryears. Primitive societies linked it with the phases of the moon or other divine processes that they could make sense of. The early scholars equated it with destruction and as an identifier of the physical inferiority of women. Aristotle, for instance, believed that women are biologically weaker than men because they only provided a space for the baby to grow while men provided the essential seed (Valentine, 2020). Similarly, Pliny the Elder pointed out that menstrual blood caused wine to go sour, crops to go barren, seeds to dry, fruits to fall off trees and dogs to go mad (Crawford, 1981).

Similar notions have been reiterated in the history of scientific research. In the 1950s, George and Olive Smith, specialists in reproductive diseases, coined the term “menotoxins” to describe the result of an experiment that supposedly proved how menstrual blood contained lethal substances. They took samples of menstrual blood and injected them into animals. When the animals died, the Smiths took it as evidence that it was due to the toxicity of menstrual blood. “Menotoxins”, thus, remained a part of scientific jargon for over two decades until it was disproved by Polish gynecologist Bernhard Zondek (*‘Menotoxins’ in a History of Periods: Impurity or Superstition?*, 2021).

Additionally, menstruation has been perceived as a matter that only concerns women. School interventions and workshops are made available only for female students. Menstrual products are designed and marketed towards women. Only women’s washrooms are equipped with menstrual hygiene facilities which prevents the accessibility of other menstruators to resources. Not only does this perpetuate the idea that it is only cis-het women who menstruate, it also upholds the notion of the gender binary.

The use of euphemisms has further left the issue in cultural and academic ambiguity. Euphemisms and taboo are closely linked. The taboo status of menstruation has caused it to be replaced with use of alternative phrases or words. In 2016, Clue, a period tracking app, conducted a survey

involving around 90,000 people from 190 countries. Around 5000 menstrual euphemisms were compiled. These both “reflect and reinforce” the cultural belief of menstruation being a pollutant (V., 2022).

Most restrictions outlined for menstruating women are upheld by religious and cultural beliefs. The Jewish code of law outlines the “*Niddah* period”, during which physical contact between man and woman is forbidden for a week. After this, the woman is required to immerse herself in a purifying bath. Similar limitations are also placed in Islam where sexual activity is prohibited during menstruation and menstruating women are excused from daily prayers and fasting, restricted from touching the *Quran* and visiting the mosque (Bhartiya, 2013). In Hinduism, early Vedic scriptures such as the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* show profound respect for the female, who is referred to as the “Supreme Being” while later Vedic texts or *Smritis* mention strict restrictions for women (Pathak, 2019). *Manusmriti*, an ancient religious and legal text of Hinduism outlines several restrictions for menstruating women, many of which have become institutionalized (Bobel *et al.*, 2020). There is also a myth, dating back to Vedic times, which links menstruation with Lord Indra’s sin of killing a demon who was a Brahman. According to this, Lord Indra committed the ultimate sin of *brahman hatya* (killing a Brahman). Women then took it upon themselves to go through menstrual flow every month to relinquish Lord Indra’s guilt (Garg & Anand, 2015).

On the contrary, while Buddhism does not outline any strict prohibitions, the influence of Hinduism can be observed in a few practices such as menstruating women not being able to circumambulate around the stupa. Likewise, certain Christian denominations such as the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church and the Russian Orthodox Church do not allow menstruating women to participate in sacraments and communions and may also make them live in seclusion huts (Bhartiya, 2013). Many tribal and native societies are also presumed to have some form of seclusion huts, such as the Ethiopian *margam gojo*, the *kurma ghar* among the Gonds in Central India, and menstrual huts among the Huaulu in Indonesia, the Yapese in Micronesia and the Yurok women of California (*Menstruation Huts*, 2023).

The effects of the menstrual stigma extend well beyond the segregation of women from the community and into their position in society. Often, how a community treats menstruation is representative of how it views its women. Practices are passed down in the form of verbal instructions from one generation to the next. Women who have grown up adhering to menstrual rituals expect their younger ones to do the same. Many rituals, like those performed at menarche, signify the reproductive potential of a young woman and her readiness for marriage. This transition from a young girl to a sexual being can be assessed as a reason for menstrual shame. In her study among the high-caste Brahmins and Chhetris of rural Nepal, Bennett (1986) examined the norms and beliefs which operate within the kinship network. At one point, Bennett asserts:

A woman's menstrual period is when she is most blatantly sexual, and thus strict segregation for the first three days represents control imposed on the potentially unruly and destructive forces of female sexuality. Through the rituals of bathing, washing their hair and clothes, and drinking of cow urine (*gaut*) with ritually purifying powers on the fourth day, women cleanse their sexuality each month and direct it toward its legitimate end: the production of offspring to carry on the lineage. (Bennett, 1983)

Douglas (1966) discussed how communities formed rules of purity and pollution to maintain order. At a larger level, this creates a lack of solidarity between women. Culturally dictated restrictions work to pit women against each other and empowers the male gaze. Further, it prevents them from participating in society. Maria Mies, for instance, explored the origins of the hierarchical relationships in society with a particular focus on the asymmetric division of labor between men and women. She suggested that the first step to analyze the biases between the genders is to look at biological determinism (Mies, 1981).

On social media, popular memes portray how women are always moody and unpredictable, especially during “that time of the month”. The notion that women are too emotional and controlled by their hormones feeds into the larger idea they are incapable of handling important roles and responsibilities. This, however, has been disproved time and again as research has shown that women are more effective in leadership positions than their male counterparts (Zenger & Folkman, 2019).

Another way in which menstrual shame is manifested is the feeling of self-consciousness. Tomi-Ann Roberts argued that women internalize feelings of shame about their bodies and become preoccupied with their physical appearance as a way of anticipating and controlling their treatment in the world. This has been termed as “self-objectification” (Roberts, 2004).

Sanitary pad commercials also play a large role to perpetuate impractical and incomplete information about menstruation. They promote secrecy through the use of allegorical images such as flowers and use blue liquid instead of red or brown to show the product’s absorption functions. Due to this, most women grow up believing that it is good manners to hide evidence of menstruation in public (Roberts *et al.*, 2002). Women in advertisements for period products are shown to be participating in outdoor activities or excelling at their jobs while donning light-colored, form-fitting clothes. Issues such as period cramps, bloating or mood swings are never addressed. Social media websites also promote the idea of the perfect, put-together, modern woman. Consequently, women are taught to conceal their menstruation rather than being taught how to manage it.

Aside from this, the curriculum of Nepal has largely neglected CSE. EHP has now been moved from a compulsory subject to an optional one. The panel of Nepal’s Curriculum Development Center has faced criticism over this decision, (“Curriculum Panel Faces Criticism over Its Subject Design” 2018). An experimental study was conducted in 2021 to test the effectiveness of CSE in secondary schools of Nepal. It was concluded that proper reproductive health sessions led by facilitators from primary health care centers had a bigger impact on the understanding of sexual health among adolescents than traditional lessons provided in class (Pokharel & Adhikari, 2021).

The data presented in this research has hinted at the role of mothers and schools as effective agents of communication for young women. Research has shown that although there are a variety of sources of information about menstruation, mothers remain the most effective one. However, they often find themselves to be unprepared, uncomfortable and unequipped to orient their daughters (Costos *et al.*, 2002). Further, the culture of “mother blaming” also exists. Mother blaming can be described as “the tendency on the part of our society to blame negative behavior

on their mothers” (Costos *et al.*, 2002). Women are tasked with parental responsibilities and societal expectations while not being given any agency.

To add to this, seclusion rituals are often justified with the pretext of providing women with a time of “rest” from usual household chores. In many traditional families, menstruation is the only time that daughters-in-law are excused from household chores. Contrarily, menstrual rituals work against women: burdening them with the extra load of having to cook and eat their meals separately, often with the sole responsibility of caring for young children.

A qualitative investigation conducted in the Kalikot district concluded that both community members and law enforcement considered the criminalization of *Chhaupadi* a welcome step. However, change wasn’t anticipated to be immediate as long-term behavioral changes and interventions are required to eliminate such deep-rooted beliefs (Baumann *et al.*, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that participants have a significantly well-rounded knowledge of menstruation and its related practices. They are also aware of the traditional narratives and cultural practices of menstrual taboos. Seclusion rituals are adhered to out of respect for the family’s values and beliefs. To a large extent, young girls also find themselves being concerned with their body image and cleanliness during menstruation. The cultural ramifications of menstrual shame translate both into social life and the classroom. Educators tasked with teaching adolescent students about the reproductive process and safe sexual practices often feel shy and awkward. This leads to further stigmatization of the issue and the risk of misinformation. In school, participants lack the space and opportunity to discuss these issues openly. Male students lack seriousness during class and distract teachers during lessons on sexual and reproductive health.

Menstrual taboos work to justify biological essentialism, isolate women, maintain a hierarchy between the sexes and advance patriarchal ideologies. It is important, thereby, to conduct a comprehensive study on menstrual restrictions to understand women’s positions in society and the means to improve them. It can be concluded that for adolescent girls, the

experience of menstruation is as paradoxical as its history. While there is recognition that menstruation is a natural process and must be treated as such, it is difficult to challenge such beliefs because they are so deeply embedded in society. Mothers and the school have been observed to be effective agents of communication for young women and the possibility of utilizing their potential, particularly during intervention or for policy making, must be researched and explored.

Therefore, the idea of menstruation being dirty is reinforced from one generation to another. While education does play a large role in eliminating discriminatory practices, most of them are upheld due to cultural beliefs and expectations. Interventions for their elimination should thus, begin at home.

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