

## Menstruation: A Silent Harassment among Women and Girls

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### **Abstract**

*This paper tries to address one of the cultural taboos related with menstruation existing and in practice in Nepalese society, creating an incident of social harassment for women and girls, in a silent mode, in the name of social norms. A methodology of unstructured one to one interview and a group discussion were employed to dig inside the issue which ends up with the remark of being in intimidation, annoyance, hassle, stigmatize, discriminate, and other ill-practices. This write-up might contribute to re-think on harmful menstruation practices in order to bring positive change in cultural practice and making menstruation talk more open in society.*

**Key Words:** *Cultural Taboos, Social Harassment, Menstruation, Incident, Societal Norms*

### **I. Introduction**

Menstruation is a natural phenomenon that happens in the female body when entering in the puberty stage. Medically, menstruation (also termed ‘period’ or ‘bleeding’) is the process in a woman of discharging (through the vagina) blood and other materials from the lining of the uterus at about monthly interval from puberty until menopause (Medicine Net newsletter, 2019). According to Collin dictionary, Harassment is a behavior which is intended to trouble or annoy someone. Similarly, Citizen Advice defines it as ‘*Harassment is unwanted behavior which you find offensive or which makes you feel intimidated or humiliated. It can happen on its own or alongside other forms of discrimination*’.

An Equality Act 2010 regards harassment as unlawful discrimination if it is because of or connected to one of these things: age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. Equality Act considered these things as protected characteristics and harassment from among one of these characteristics is called harassment related to a protected characteristic (Citizen advice, 2021).

Further it says it is harassment where the behavior is meant to or has the effect of either:

- a. violating your dignity.
- b. creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

It means it is harassment even if the person harassing you doesn’t mean to offend or intimidate you, as far as the harassment has one of the above effects (ibid).

All the ways of harassment are seen to be rightly applied in the case of menstruating girls and women. And it also continues silently in the name of socio-cultural practice, manufacturing it as a naturalized phenomenon.

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## **Problem**

We often talk about harassment that frequently occurs in work places, schools, public venues, and private spaces. We also see other forms of harassment practiced in the name of cultural and ritual rites, but we remain silent about it. This type of harassment has been going on unnoticed since time immemorial, and no doubt, if we do not act upon it promptly, it may continue even for many more years in the days to come ahead.

This paper talks about menstrual-related harassment that is still in prevalence in our society. The menstrual-related harassment has deteriorated the life of many women and girls and will continue to victimize them in the name of socio-cultural norms and practices, i.e. to maintain purity, for an uncertain span of time. If we expect zero tolerance against any sort of harassment, the instant action must, at first, be taken to end menstrual related harassment through change in cultural practices.

In menstrual-related harassment, each individual who practices societal menstrual related rules in the name of belief and to sustain culture is an offender. Menstrual related taboos are so deeply embedded in the society that they seem very natural and undoubtedly contribute to promote a kind of culture of being humiliated in the form of culture practice. Thus, to reflect this glass ceiling of silent harassment, this paper sets the following objectives:

- a. to reflect the behaviors related to menstrual practice that creates humiliating or unpleasant feelings.
- b. to ascertain that menstruation taboos are forms of harassment, particularly 'silent in nature'.
- c. to suggest ways to bring a change in menstrual practice in order to lessen intimidation.

## **Literature Review**

There has been many studies and researches related to menstruation worldwide from different dimensions (positive and negative aspects of menstrual blood), but what matter most is considering menstrual blood as "*bad blood*" (PSI/Nepal, MIRA, Maverick, 2017), and literally stating that female body is *impure* during menstruation cycle. This prejudice has led to different forms of social ill behaviors like discrimination, restriction in feeding and mobility, oppression and even exclusion from daily social activities. The study carried out by PSI/Nepal, MIRA, Maverick (2017) found that about 89% of girls in Nepal experienced some forms of restriction or exclusion. Hawkey, Usser, Perz, Metusela (2017) stated that menstruation is an internal bodily process but the way how women experience and construct menstruation is highly influenced by the socio-cultural sphere in which they reside. This very study also reveals that menstruation in many non-western countries is strongly associated with dirt, taboos and restriction. Menstruating women are excluded from religious ceremonies just because they are taken as an agent of spreading pollution, dirt and impurity. These ideologies regard a menstruating body as an unclean source of pollution, leading women and girls to feel humiliated, and create a moment of being ashamed of their own bodies.

Studies on menstruation have shown that taboos related to menstruation are shaped by major religions like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism which believe in certain kind of restriction and prohibition to menstruating women.

According to Hindu mythology, menstruation is a *dosha*, rightly referred as '*Rajaswala Dosha*' (Bhartiya, 2013). This kind of cliché strengthens the general public belief to take menstruating women as '*unclean*' beings. It also leads to various kinds of discriminations, intimidation, ill behaviors and practices towards them.

In the book "Apavitra Ragat", Poudel (2018) shares her own experience during menstruation and further mentions how Nepali women and girls are discriminated and treated inhumanly. Research conducted by her on menstrual practices came up with the findings that rural Nepalese women are unaware of undergarments and pads. So they bleed on their clothes. Likewise, in many households, women use the same rags for a long period of time. A study by Grogg (2018) in Mustang of Nepal found that women and girls cannot afford menstrual pads. So they are bound to reuse cloth pads, which require to be washed and dried in sunlight. But due to fear of being humiliated, they hang the cloth in dark and private places.

There still exists a tradition called *Chhaupadi* (isolation of women and girls during their menstruation) in Nepal, a cruel socialization where women and girls are evicted once a month for four days to the unhygienic outhouse. A study conducted by Poudel (2017) in western Nepal revealed that women are regarded impure during their menstruation; everything will be defiled from their touch; and they will invite various misfortunes such god's wrath, death of their livestock and destruction of their crops. The study further found that women and girls are made to accept this tradition with no room of objection. Women and girls are socialized to keep menstruation secret.

Beside Hinduism, other religion like the Quran (2:222) reads "*.....it is an impurity so keep away from women during it and do not approach them until they are cleansed.*" (Bhartiya, 2013)

Similarly, the Bible (Leviticus 15) states "*.....in her menstrual impurity; she is unclean...whoever touches...shall be unclean and shall wash his clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until evening.*" (Druet, 2017)

In Buddhism, there is a belief that ghost eats blood so menstruating women attract ghosts, and put the life of herself and others in threat. The statement made by the Buddha Dharma Education Association further reveals that while fermenting rice, menstruating women should not be nearby or the rice will be spoilt (Bhartiya, 2013). Similar statement can also be found in the study conducted by Joshi (2017). In 1878, the British Medical Journal posted that discharging women made a bacon rot.

A study conducted by Repta (2004) in the context of western society found that women are socialized to be embarrassed, and ashamed and also to feel proud of their menstruation, while men are socialized to be distant, uninformed and unaware of menstruation. The case is

somewhat similar in Nepalese context. Here too, women and girls are socialized to maintain restriction and prohibition when they menstruate. Their menstrual blood is regarded to be 'dirty' and 'pollutant'.

Regarding menstruation, Gandhi (the national figure of India) also made a statement saying '*menstruation was a manifestation of the distorted soul of women because of their sexuality and when woman's soul became pure, then she would automatically stop menstruating*' (Bhartia, 2013). Girl's menarche (the first menstruation cycle) is celebrated in most of the culture as a symbol of puberty, but after that, she has to live rest of her 7 days a month with strict restriction, prohibition and entitles it as '*ritually unclean.*' (ibid)

There are many mythologies associated with menstruation and all these are, in fact, creating a moment of being harassed, which is usually practiced in the form of discrimination, restriction, prohibition, stigmatization, situation of humiliation, ashamed, uneasiness and many more to fit under the criteria of purity/pollution. These rosters of restrictions in the name of maintaining '*purity*' should be abolished to free women and girls from being harassed.

## **II. Methodology**

The study in this paper is based on the informal talk with women and girls from Shilgadhi, Doti, a district in far-western region of Nepal, and from Kathmandu capital of Nepal. The conversation took place in informal session because the researcher had to win their trust so that they could openly express their feelings and opinions about ill-practices during menstruation. The interaction was typically based on sharing experiences regarding menstruation and its taboos. Tools used for interaction was unstructured one-by-one interview, mostly probing in nature in both sites and a group discussion in Shilgadhi.

The nature of data was qualitative and the source was primary. A secondary source was also used for literature review and to bridge the study issue with primary data. Experiences shared by respondents were noted down later in order to avoid any distraction and disruption of conversation. In this paper, all together 20 respondents, 10 from each study area, and a group discussion comprised of 6 respondents between the ages of 14 to 55 are summarized.

## **III. Results**

Based on conversation, the researcher found that women and girls who follow traditional practices seem to have fear embedded in their mind: fear of being harmed if menstruation rules are not followed, fear of causing misfortune to their family members, particularly to male members, fear of breaking or changing socio-cultural rules, fear of committing sin, fear from God and fear to defy the tradition. The study also found that young generations do not want to follow strict rules associated with menstruation, but they fear to revolt or be vocal.

Women and girls from Kathmandu were found to be more liberate (*particularly the site being urban, open and mixed-society*) from restriction and prohibition as of staying in one confined room, in-taking of food, entertainment, stepping into kitchen, cooking food for everyone, etc, but still they have not been able to avoid some rules, particularly the religious ones as of not

going to temple, putting god's tika, bathing in four days of menstruation to purify themselves, participating in the deceased one's function (*sharade*) and not worshipping god even at home for minimum 7 days and maximum 12 days.

The condition is even worse among girls and women in Shilgadhi. Menstrual girls and women have to confine themselves in separate rooms for 7 days and follow the rules assigned for menstruation such as separate stairs or path to reach their room, separate utensils, plate, water jar, comb, bed, bed sheet, mattress, blanket, etc. — everything separate, treating them as an outcast, and if they disobey the rules, then no doubt they will be blamed for bringing misfortunes and a moment of humiliation in the family. One of the respondents aged 14 shared her experience stating *"I cried very badly when I menstruated for the first time. At first, I was having bad pain in my lower stomach and then I felt as if my freedom had been snatched out of me. Suddenly I became impure and an agent of spreading impurity. I was in a dilemma and trauma"*.

Similarly, another respondent aged 20 clearly said: *"I know it's not impure or dirty blood and my touch does not spread impurity, but what can I do? We girls have to tolerate every kind of discomfort, hassle, embarrassment, discrimination and stigmatization just because we bleed"*.

There is also a restriction in in-taking nutritious food like ghee, milk, meat, etc, and separate utensils and plates have to be used just to maintain 'purity'. A 20-year old girl commented: *"I don't have to cook by myself when I menstruate, but I have a separate room to stay and a separate plate to eat my food. They ask me to hold my plate and they pour food in my plate with caution so that their utensils would not touch my plate. Every time I feel so discriminated and hassled but I am helpless"*.

All these statements reveal the truth of violation of dignity, a situation of humiliation among women and girls.

For 4 to 7 days of menstruation, every woman and girl has to take bath early in the morning. When it is still dark, they are not allowed to bathe in the regular bathroom and they have to use open space like backyard. They have to change and wash their clothes everyday for 4 to 7 days after taking bath. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day, they have to wash everything used by them like bed sheet, blankets, curtain, etc. They have to clean the room with mixture of cow dung and *rato mato* (*red soil*) and sprinkle pure water everywhere — over them and in the room. This practice is considered as a process of getting "*purity*" again. In some cases, it is even worse; women/girls have to drink cow's pee to purify their body. Regarding this ritual, one of the female participants expressed: *"I really do feel bad from inside whenever I have to drink cow's pee. I don't know why we girls are treated in such a way just because we menstruate. How can cow's pee purify us? Menstruation is a natural process and this kind of bad ritual is in practice. People nearby also pass the comments such as 'did you have cow's pee or you cheat?'. I don't like the time I menstruate but I don't have a choice. Menstruation is not my choice and I don't have any option besides following it."*

Similarly, another respondent mentioned: *“I fear when I bath in the backyard early in the morning. When it is still dark, it is even worse during winter season. It is open space and I fear a snake will bite me or someone will rape me or you know..... I don’t know why but I really fear and I am annoyed.”*

These above quotes are related to the harassment under protected characteristics: religion, belief and sex under equality act.

Toileting is also very challenging for them. They are not allowed to use a regular toilet. They have to use a separate toilet without water supply. And such a toilet is generally constructed far from the place they stay. It is too risky and life threatening, especially at night. This place is frequently haunted by wild animals at night. Regarding the same issue and the use of toilet during day time, one of the respondents said: *“I feel annoyed and uncomfortable while going to that toilet in day light because everyone will know that I am menstruating and I don’t want everyone to know about it. I think people will take me in a different way. I feel they are judging us. So, I usually avoid drinking water, and I use toilet only if I fail to hold myself any more. Otherwise, I will wait until the evening and the night.”*

Annoyance and discomfort are the outcomes of the unfriendly environment created by the menstrual taboo. Obviously toileting is a physical act of a human being, but the trend of maintaining a separate toilet during menstruation creates a hostile situation. And this sort of social practice naturally undermines the biological process of menstruation, creating the moment of harassment of females.

On one of the queries regarding the belief that something bad might happen either to them or to their family members if menstrual rules are not followed, a 35-year-old respondent from Shilgadhi said: *“Yes, I myself have undergone this bitter experience. Once I mistakenly happened to touch my husband’s belonging and his health started deteriorating. This is because he is the one who offered food to our deceased ancestor (another traditional practice) and my touch made thing impure. So, I believe in menstrual rules and I persuade my daughters to follow the same as I did.”*

Similarly, another respondent of age 49 from Kathmandu replied: *“I strictly follow all the rules and I believe it because I have seen my husband had a health problem when I was careless with the rules. He starts shaking if purity is not maintained.”*

These above statements show that for some women menstrual beliefs do not seem offensive themselves and highlights that maintaining menstrual belief is concerned to the purity and health of male members of the family. This belief has been silently leading to a form of unlawful gender discrimination.

Respondent of age 30 commented: *“I am a teacher by profession and I don’t believe in these all practices but my in-laws believe. So, I have to follow menstrual rules but I really feel annoyed. I just wanted to check, so one time what I did was, I didn’t tell my in-laws that I was*

*menstruating. I cooked food, served them and did everything as usual. They didn't comment of having a headache or any health related issues that time which otherwise they would have blamed as I did not follow the menstruation rules. They blamed me earlier of having headache, nausea and bad health when I disobeyed the rules. That time, when I didn't tell them, made me realize that previously they might have been pretending to have bad health or with some reason they got it but of course not because of my touch. Sometimes I wonder when all these superstitions will come to an end."*

Likewise, the respondent of age 17 from Kathmandu said: *"I had been to temple knowingly when I was menstruating but alone without letting my family members know about it. Nothing bad happened neither to me nor to my family. I just wanted to check how my menstruation could turn out bad to someone when I did not follow the traditional practice."*

Another respondent of age 35 from Kathmandu said: *"I myself don't believe in all the rules but my in-laws believe them, so I have to follow. I don't regard menstruation makes us impure or any bad thing might happen from our touch, I have given much freedom to my daughters as I want to bring change in these ill-practices associated with menstruation but the big obstacle is that these cultural taboos are so deeply embedded within us that it's difficult to abandon easily. Our fear plays a huge factor in coming forward against these ill-practices."*

These opinions with the belief something bad might happen from the touch of menstruating girls and women have led to stigmatize repeatedly female body as defiling agent. Despite the fact, belief results nothing such misfortune, just leaving a feeling of degradation.

Regarding the probe on bringing change in menstrual practices, the respondent of age 30 shared: *"It's not that we cannot protest, but it takes time and it's challenging because it's rooted in our religious ritual. Disregarding religious rituals is considered to be sinful, and there is a fear of being outcast by the society. Hence, knowingly or unknowingly we have to tolerate everything."*

Similarly, a respondent aged 15 from Kathmandu said: *"Once when I asked my mother why I was not allowed to enter the temple during my menstrual cycle, she replied me not to ask this kind of question. She just said that it has been practiced for ages and we have to follow it."*

Likewise, another 38-year-old respondent from Kathmandu said: *"These rules are all human made. When I was unmarried, my mother made me follow these rules of maintaining purity through restriction on certain activities. Luckily, I got married in an open-minded family, where, during menstruation, I am allowed to cook food and serve my family members. My husband also serves food to his deceased ancestors during my menstruating time. Once I was in my third day of menstruation and someone from our relatives demised. There was no one else in the house. So, I had to go to their house. My relatives told me to take a bath. Then only I could attend the funeral function. Similarly, we have a tradition of serving food to deceased one on 7<sup>th</sup> day of demise. I was on my 6<sup>th</sup> day of menstruation. Some people said that a mother of a son can cook food to serve deceased one even on 6<sup>th</sup> day of her menstruation after taking a bath. Even a priest*

*told me that menstruating daughter can cook food and serve to mourn family members if there is no one beside her, on condition if she takes bath daily.”*

All these responses reflect that these menstrual beliefs are being transferred subliminally from generation to generation, not only among women and girls but to other members of the society as well, provoking its silence, despite humans being made to favor with time and space, and manufacturing it as naturalized.

#### **IV. Discussion**

The menstruating women and girls are not impure; impurity lies in how one perceives and acts accordingly. The practice of taking bath during menstruation actually is to maintain self-hygiene and cleanliness. Besides, all these rituals, either religious, social or cultural, are all made depending upon time and place and their favorableness. Thus, these menstrual rituals and practices indeed are human-made. So, menstrual practices should be managed with dignity. And menstruation should be taken as a natural biological process in the body of girls and women instead of taking it as a medium to harass them with a tag of purity/pollution.

Most women and girls seem to be in dilemma regarding bringing a change in menstrual practice as it is embedded in religious belief. Almost all women and girls ignore the incidents that happen with them and use it as one of the strong coping strategies instead of speaking and acting against it. Belief on menstruation practices is deeply inculcated in the mind of women and girls from an early age. The intimidation that something bad might happen to them or their family members forbid them abandoning and acting against these practices. It is because menstrual belief is chained with cultural norms and values, and, hence, each woman and girl naturally internalizes it as a part of their life. It is also because menstrual rules are linked with a religion and one fears to go against it thinking such an act to be a sin.

There is a constitutional provision of punishment of three months' jail or fine of three thousand rupees or both for those who practice '*chhaupadi*'. But the government of Nepal does not seem accountable to the laws. The Constitution of Nepal 2015 ensures following rights to Nepalese citizens, which are directly linked with menstrual discrimination and menstrual health.

Article 16: Right to live with Dignity:

- Every person shall have the right to live with dignity.

Article 18: Right to Equality:

- No discrimination shall be made in the application of laws on the ground of origin, religion, race, caste, tribe, sex, physical, condition, condition of health, marital status, pregnancy, economic condition, language or region, ideology or on similar other grounds.



Article 24: Right against Untouchability and Discrimination:

- No person shall be subjected to any form of untouchability or discrimination in any private or public places on grounds of his or her origin, caste, tribe, community, profession, occupation or physical condition.

Article 35: Right Relating to Health:

- Every citizen shall have the right of access to clean drinking water and sanitation.

Article 38: Rights of Women:

No woman shall be subjected to physical, mental, sexual, psychological or other form of violence or exploitation on grounds of religion, social, cultural tradition, practice or any other grounds. Such act shall be punishable by law, and the victim shall have the right to obtain compensation in accordance with law. (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, 2020)

It has also violated international rights like the Convention on the Rights of the Children (CRC), the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that mentions reproductive and sexual rights. Additionally, it also violates several human rights like the right to non-discrimination, privacy and the right to freedom from inhuman and degrading treatment, from abuse and violence (WSSCC, WaterAid, Domestos, 2013).

Despite all these ensured rights, findings depict that women and girls have experienced humiliation, discomfort, annoyance, stigmatization, discrimination, and hassle. This can be addressed as unlawful harassment because it happens not one time but repeatedly each month encompassed by silence and sheathed by myths, reproducing a moment of being harassed by passing ill-practices from ages, and manufacturing it as a natural phenomenon.

## **V. Conclusion**

Menstruation is obviously not a choice for females, but it is a natural process. All menstrual-related practices are enmeshed in the foundation of belief of purity and pollution. This belief and socially constructed code of conducts associated with menstruation put the lives of women and girls in vain. They feel inferior; they establish unhealthy relationship with their bodies; and they internalize themselves of being impure, consequently resulting in limiting boundaries in their life and a state of humiliation.

There is an utmost need to break this silence despite the biggest hurdles and challenges, and to emancipate all women and girls from social and cultural bondage in order to live their life with dignity, confidence and pride, but not in intimidation or annoyance or harassment. It should be practiced freely and naturally, not with the objective of continuing harmful cultural practices.

The study encompasses only the female version of menstrual practices and their experiences. The inclusion of fewer numbers of participants is due to the sensitivity of the issue, the

participants' hesitation to speak up and severity of the existing cultural practices. However, further study can be conducted in the future incorporating male participants towards their perception regarding menstrual practices in order to find out the loophole behind the continuation of all the harmful practices. Also a compare and contrast study can be carried out to analyze the similarities and differences in such practices/beliefs by incorporating respondents from two or more places. The government should sensitively act to eradicate these culture related ill-practices and other discriminating acts against women such as 'sati pratha', 'deukipratha', 'kamaiya pratha' and so on.

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