

Social Beliefs and Practices associated with Menstrual Hygiene among Adolescent Girls of Amritsar, Punjab, India

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Abstract: Menstrual practices are still shrouded by taboos and socio-cultural restrictions. Thus adolescent girls remain ignorant of the scientific facts and hygiene practices which sometimes result into adverse health consequences. This study was undertaken with the objective of eliciting the beliefs, perception and source of information regarding menstruation among the adolescent girl students and to find out the status of menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls. An exploratory and descriptive study has been conducted among 10th class adolescent girl students of senior secondary schools in Amritsar City, Punjab. A pre-designed and pre-tested interview schedule has been during the interview. Data has been analyzed statistically by chi square test. Out of 300 respondents 184 (61.3 percent) adolescent girls are having awareness about menstruation prior to initiation of menarche. Mother was the first informant regarding menstruation in case of 160 (53.3 per cent) girls. 221 (73.7 per cent) girls believed it a normal physiological process. 207 (69.0 per cent) girls knew regarding use of sanitary pad during the menstruation. Regarding menstrual hygiene practices, 68.7 per cent girls used sanitary pads and 30 (10.0 per cent) respondents practicing any cloth or rag/ cotton during menstruation. For the purpose of cleaning external practiced by the family, 294 (98.0 per cent) girls practiced different types of family restrictions during menstruation.

Keywords: Adolescent Girl, Menarche, Menstrual Hygiene, Sanitary Pad, Restrictions, external genitalia, educational

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents aged 10 to 19 years represent one fifth of the population of India, the health consequences of neglect of their reproductive health needs takes on enormous proportions. Female young girls' reproductive health is poorly understood and ill served in India. In this age group, girls are growing and have inadequate awareness of reproductive health mechanism. They are also not aware about how to maintain hygienic practices during menstruation. Moreover, reproductive tract infections (RTIs) are more prevalent in this age group. Menstruation is a phenomenon, unique to the females; the onset of menstruation is one of the most important land-mark in the process of growth and maturation. Though, menstruation is a natural and physiological process for all healthy adult women as ever it has been surrounded by secrecy and myths in many societies. It is viewed through a set of widely shared negative assumptions, societally and scientifically. Menstrual bleeding is viewed differently from women to women, family to family and culture to culture. Attitudes towards menstruation are often culturally based and adolescent girls may be taught a variety of folk belief and practices at the time of puberty. The first menstruation (menarche) occurs from 10 to 15 years of age with a mean age of 12.5 years.

Adolescent girls constitute a vulnerable group, particularly in India where female child is neglected one. Menstruation is still regarded as something unclean or dirty in Indian society. The manner in which a girl learns about menstruation and its associated changes may have an impact process; it is linked with several misconceptions and inadequate practices, which sometimes result into adverse health outcomes.

Hygiene-related practices of young girls during menstruation are of considerable importance, as it has a health impact in terms of increased vulnerability to reproductive tract infections (RTIs), interplay of socio-economic status and menstrual hygiene practices are noticeable. Today millions of women are sufferers of RTIs and its complications and often the infection is transmitted to the offspring of the pregnant mother.

Women having better knowledge and safe practices regarding menstrual hygiene are less vulnerable to RTIs and its consequences. Therefore, adequate knowledge about menstruation, right from childhood may escalate safe practices and help in mitigating the suffering of millions of would be mothers.

This study was undertaken: (1.) to elicit the beliefs, perceptions and source of information regarding menstruation among the adolescent school girls; (2.) to find out the status of menstrual hygiene status among adolescent girls.

MATERIAL & METHODS

The present study was carried out among the adolescent girls from schools in Amritsar city, Punjab, India during the period of August 2005 to December 2005.

Three hundred adolescent school girls were selected 10th class of different schools. A pre-designed and pre-tested interview schedule was used to conduct the study. After taking permission from the school management, the teacher incharge of 10th Class of the respective school was explained regarding the purpose of the study. The rapport was built up with girl students and verbal consent was obtained from them. The pre-designed and pre-tested interview schedule was used for the study having questions related to awareness about menstruation, source of information regarding menstrual hygiene and various types of restrictions practiced by the family during menstruation. The data collected was analyzed by using the chi square test. (x2 test).

RESULTS

Among 300 respondents in the present study 171 (57 %) were Hindus, 123 (41 %) Sikhs whereas only 6 (2%) adolescent girls belonged to Christians. Most of the study subjects i.e. 196 (65.3 %) were from nuclear families while 104 (34. %) from joint families. Fathers and Mothers of the respondents had almost equal level of education i.e. graduation 106 (35.4 %) and 115 (38.3 %) respectively. Most of the respondents; fathers, 109 (36.3 %) were businessmen and 100 (33.3 %) were in Government job. 237 (79.0 %) respondents' mothers were housewives whereas 63 (21%) were working women.

Table 1 shows that 184 (61.3 %) of the respondents were having knowledge about menstruation prior to attainment of menarche. Among 300 respondents 'mother was the first informant in 160 (53.3 %) of the respondents. Other sources of information were sisters, friends, teachers and relatives i.e. 12.7 %, 6.3 %, 11.7 % and 16.0 % respectively. In this study the mean age of menarche of the respondents has been observed as 12.5 years.

Table 2 depicts the different beliefs and perceptions regarding menstruation among the respondents. It has been observed that 221 (73.7%) girls believe that menstruation is a natural

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Table 1: Information about menarche (n=300)

Information	number	Per cent
Age of menarche (years)		
10	5	1.7
11	8	2.6
12	45	15.0
13	48	16.0
14	114	38.0
15	80	26.7
Awareness about menstruation	184	61.3
Before menarche		
Source of information before menarche		
Mother	160	53.3
Sister	38	12.7
Friend	19	6.3
Teacher	35	11.7
Others	48	16.0

Table 2: Perception about menstruation (N=300)

Beliefs/ conception	Number	per cent
A Physiological process/normal growth	221	73.7
A curse of God	50	16.6
A sin	15	5.0
A disease/abnormal	14	4.7

physiological process whereas 50 (16.6%) and 15 (5.0%) believe it as a curse by God or a result of some sin. 14 (4.7%) girls believe that it is an abnormal process.

Table 3 reveals that nearly one third 93 (31.0 %) of the respondents are ignorant about the use of sanitary pad during menstruation. 207 (69.0 %) of the respondents are using sanitary pads during the menstruation whereas clean cloth being use by 63 (23.0 %) and 30 (10.0 %) practicing any cloth or rag or cotton. Regarding different types of restrictions practiced during menstruation Table 4 exhibits that 114 (38.0 %) are accepting the restrictions imposed by the parents while 186 (62.0 %) are not responding to the different types of dictates of their parents during menstruation. Multiple responses of the respondents depicted in the table reveal that 216 (72 %) of the respondents are restricted not to visit religious places of touch sacred books, 82 (27.3 %) to take specific food, 78 (26.0 %) to touch pickle and 38 (12.7%) to play/outing/cycling.

Table 3: Practice of menstrual hygiene (N=300)

Menstrual hygiene	Number	Per cent
Use of material during menstruation		
Sanitary pad	207	69
New Cloth pieces and pad	63	21
Any cloth or Rag or Cotton	30	10
Cleaning of external genitalia		
Regular Bath	295	98.3
Irregular Wash	5	1.7

Table 4: Restriction Practiced During Menstruation

Restrictions	Number	percent
Not practiced	114	38.0
Practiced	186	62.0
Religious places and sacred books	216	72.0
To touch pickle	78	26.0
School	4	1.3
Playing/Outing/cycling	38	12.7
Specific food	82	27.3
No restrictions	6	2.0

DISCUSSION

This study shows that the age of menstruating girls ranged from 10 to 15 years with maximum number of girls falling between 12 and 15 years of age. Almost similar study conducted by Deo et al.¹ reported that the age of menstruating girls ranged from 12 to 17 years with maximum number of girls between 13 to 15 years of age. In this study, the mean age of menarche of the respondents has been observed as 12.5 years, whereas in a study carried out in Rajasthan by Khanna et al.², the mean age at menarche was found to be 13.2 years.

Amazingly, 116 (38.7%) adolescent girls were ignorant regarding menstruation before menarche in this study. But, each and every girl should be aware about menstruation, which is important event at the peak of adolescence and ideally a mother should be the main informant at this tender age. However, mother was the first informant in case of

160(53.3 percent) adolescent girls. This gap might be due to low literacy and low socio economic status of some families in the study, which have fuelled the inhibitions. Mother has to talk to her daughter regarding the significance, hygienic practice and a healthy attitude towards menstruation; she will play an important role in maintaining a healthy reproductive health tract for the each and every girl child, who after she becomes a mother, percolates the healthy message to her female siblings. In a study conducted among 664 schools girls aged 14 to 18 in Mansoura, Egypt by EL- Gilany et al.³; mass media were the main source of information about menstrual hygiene, followed by mothers.

In a study carried out in Rajasthan by Khanna et al.⁽²⁾ 92% of the girls were not aware about the natural phenomena of menstruation before menarche among women and most of the girls got first hand information about menstruation from their mothers with other major informants' like sisters and friends.

It was observed in the present study that 221(73.7 percent) girls believe that menstruation is a physiological process, whereas in a similar study carried out in Rajasthan by Khanna et al.⁽²⁾ nearly 70 percent believed that menstruation was not natural process. In the present study 69 percent of the girls were knowledgeable about the use of sanitary pads during menstruation. The above observations might be due to better literacy level of most of the mothers and proper health education programmes in schools which should be continuously focus on menstrual hygiene among girls in future to sustain the same.

This study shows that majority 221 (73.7%) of the girls preferred to practice sanitary pads as menstrual absorbent during menstruation. In a study conducted in Rajasthan by Khanna et al.² three fourth of the girls used old cloths during menstruation and only 25 percent reported the use of readymade sanitary pads. In a similar study conducted among 664 adolescent school girls of 14 to 18 years of age in Mansoura, Egypt by EL-Gilany et al.³, different aspects of personal hygiene were generally found to be unsatisfactory, such as not bathing during menstruation with lack of privacy being an important problem. Different types of restrictions were practised by most of the adolescent girls in the present study, possibly due to ignorance and false perceptions regarding menstrual process.

CONCLUSION

Before bringing any change in the menstrual practices, the adolescent girls should be educated about the issues and facts of menstruation, physiological implications regarding significance of menstruation and development of secondary sexual characteristics and above all, about proper hygiene practices with selections of disposable sanitary absorbent material. This can be promoted and achieved through information, education and communication (IEC) activities like television educational program, compulsory sex education curriculum in schools and knowledgeable interactions of sociologists, health personnel, teachers and parents with adolescent girls. All mothers irrespective of their educational level should be counseled to break their inhibitions regarding discussing with their daughters about menstrual process much before the age of menarche.

Universalized use of sanitary pads or absorbent material needs to be advocated to every adolescent girl by making the easy availability through social marketing. This study reveals that menstrual hygiene is still far from satisfactory among adolescent girls while ignorance, unsafe practices, false beliefs and reluctance of mother to educate her adolescent girl about menstruation are still common among them. Thus the above results of the study reinforce the need to encourage safe and hygienic practices among the adolescent girls and bring them out of misconceptions, restrictions, traditional taboos and myths regarding menstruation to further improve and promote the menstrual hygiene practices.

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