

MENSTRUAL TABOOS: UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL PRACTICES AND THEIR IMPACT ON WOMEN'S HEALTH AND RIGHTS

¹Poonam Singh Parihar*, ²Dr. Rita

¹Research Scholar, ²Supervisor

Department of Social Work, Sikkim Alpine University, South Sikkim, India

Email ID: salty_chauhan@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Menstrual taboos are deeply ingrained cultural practices that surround menstruation, affecting how societies perceive and treat menstruating individuals. These taboos vary widely across cultures, often leading to stigmatization, discrimination, and restricted access to menstrual health resources and education. This research paper aims to explore the origins, prevalence, and impact of menstrual taboos on women's health and rights, highlighting the need for education, advocacy, and policy changes to address these issues effectively.

Paper Identification



**Corresponding Author*

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Introduction

Menstruation is a natural biological process experienced by women and girls globally, yet it is often shrouded in secrecy, shame, and misconceptions due to cultural taboos. These taboos manifest in various forms, from restrictions on activities to outright exclusion and isolation of menstruating individuals. Understanding the roots of these taboos and their implications is crucial for promoting gender equality, health equity, and human rights.

The origins of menstrual taboos can be traced back to ancient beliefs and religious practices. Many cultures viewed menstruation as unclean or impure, leading to segregation and restrictions on menstruating individuals' participation in social, religious, and economic activities. Over time, these taboos have persisted and evolved, shaping societal attitudes and behaviors towards menstruation.

Menstrual taboos are prevalent in diverse cultures and regions, impacting millions of women and girls globally. In some communities, menstruation is associated with notions of impurity, sin, or witchcraft, leading to harmful practices such as menstrual seclusion, limited access to sanitation facilities, and inadequate menstrual hygiene management.

The stigma and shame surrounding menstruation contribute to negative health outcomes for women and girls. Limited access to menstrual products, clean water, and sanitation facilities can lead to infections, reproductive health issues, and missed educational or economic opportunities. Moreover, the psychological toll of menstrual taboos can result in anxiety, low self-esteem, and social exclusion.

Addressing Menstrual Taboos

Efforts to challenge menstrual taboos require a multi-faceted approach. Education plays a critical role in dispelling myths, promoting menstrual hygiene, and empowering women and girls to manage their periods safely and confidently. Community engagement, advocacy campaigns, and policy reforms are also essential to eliminate discriminatory practices, ensure access to menstrual health resources, and promote gender-sensitive environments.

"Taboo" refers to something that is forbidden, restricted, or restricted in some way; it is something that is not authorized by culture. The act of forbidding something based on specific beliefs and ways of behaving is known as a taboo. Menstrual taboos¹ are social norms that pertain to the process of menstruation as well as the women who experience it. In a country like India, where discussions are taking place on a wide range of topics related to gender inequality and women's empowerment, the taboos around menstruation are an important topic that has to be addressed. A woman will have her period for a total of forty years over the course of her lifetime, but the majority of women who live in developing countries do not have access to clean water, safe and private spaces for washing and cleaning, materials for absorbing menstrual blood, or facilities for the proper and safe disposal of used menstrual hygiene materials. This is despite the fact that the average woman will have her period for forty years over the course of her lifetime. The perpetuation of beliefs and social taboos around menstruation among members of society is the primary factor contributing to the prevalence of this disorder.

The process of mensuration was not always regarded as a filthy and unclean activity. According to historian Narendra Nath Bhattacharya, who was cited by researcher Janet Chawla in the article "Mythic Origins of Menstrual Taboo in Rig Veda²," menstruation was formerly regarded as a blessing in many Indian societies³. In fact, the blood

¹ Knight, C. (1995). *Blood relations: Menstruation and the origins of Culture*. London & New Haven: Yale University Press. p. 443. Re-drawn after Wright, B. J. (1968). *Rock Art of the Pilbara Region, North-west Australia*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. fig. 112.

² Maddock, K. (1978). "Metaphysics in a mythical view of the world". In Buchler, I. A.; Maddock, K. (eds.). *The Rainbow Serpent*. The Hague: Mouton. pp. 99–118. ISBN 9780202900902.

that was shed during menstruation was even presented as a sacrifice to several deities. Even in modern times, many Indian societies hold the belief that mensuration is a form of good luck. When a girl reaches the age of menarche, there is a festival organized by her family in many parts of Assam and Odisha. During this event, the girl is worshipped, and she is given several blessings, among other things. But even after the celebrations, worships, and comparisons of a girl as being equal to deities, the historical myths, taboos, and stigma around the female body and menstruation have overshadowed progressive attempts in India that try to improve menstrual cleanliness. These projects are targeted at promoting menstrual hygiene in India. However, at some point in history, the same culture that praised the wondrous capabilities of women's bodies transitioned into one that punished women for their capacity to perpetuate the human race. In many cultures, the act of mensuration is seen as a form of ritualized contamination of the holy space. This notion is accompanied with restrictions, and sometimes even rules, on the lives and activities of women in their day-to-day existence. For instance, some of the most widespread customs prohibit people from entering their own homes or kitchens, touching food, water, or plants, or taking part in religious events. Other customs prohibit them from entering public places. The concept that whatever a menstrual woman touches would be ruined is a widespread one: if she touches a cow, it will become sterile; if she uses water, which is in and of itself a cleansing agent, she will pollute the water. Neither of these scenarios is true. According to the article "Menstruation Related Myths in India: Strategies for Combating It," in certain regions of India, women who are menstruating are not even permitted to use communal baths during the first few days of their cycle. This restriction applies just to the beginning of their cycle. Women are sometimes put in situations where they have little choice but to use unsanitary methods to absorb menstrual blood, such as absorbing it with newspaper or dirty rags. Not only do these attitudes and actions insult the dignity of women, but they also have significant repercussions for the health and well-being of women. To make matters even more difficult, many women do not have access to the facilities and supplies necessary for basic hygiene since there is a lack of resources and awareness. As a result, every period is fraught with mental, emotional, and physical distress, which impacts the lives of Indian women in their day-to-day activities. Menstrual hygiene is essential to the dignity and well-being of women and constitutes an essential component of core hygiene sanitation and reproductive health care. In spite of the fact that the primary goal of these limits was to promote comfort and manage the overall well-being of a female while she was menstruating, because menstruation is believed to be a scientific and biological phenomenon. Despite this, as the years progressed, people began to regard these behaviors as taboos and myths connected to menstruation and females. Even though we live in the 21st century, menstruation is still frequently stigmatized due to the many unfavorable cultural attitudes that are linked with it⁴. One of these attitudes is the notion that women and girls who menstruate are polluted, as well as believed to be dirty and impure. An incident occurred in Gujarat in which approximately seventy female students attending an institute in Bhuj were ordered by the principal to remove their undergarments in order to demonstrate that they were not menstruating. This was done because the school had a rule that stated menstruating females would not be allowed on the hostel campus and that they would have to stay in a separate room during their period. This event took place in the year 2020, when discussions about women's empowerment and gender equality are taking place, but many aspects of society are still mired in the level of erroneous beliefs. This episode is a

³ Maddock, K. (1978). "Introduction". In Buchler, I. A.; Maddock, K. (eds.). *The Rainbow Serpent*. The Hague: Mouton. ISBN 9780202900902.

⁴ Hughes, Bee; Røstvik, Camilla Mørk (2020), "Menstruation in Art and Visual Culture", *The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication*, American Cancer Society, pp. 1–5, doi:10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc282, ISBN 978-1-119-42912-8, S2CID 225633529, retrieved 24 September 2020

glaring illustration of the fact that women still face uphill battles in their quest to be treated with dignity and to avoid being stigmatized as filthy or disgusting because they are menstruating.

According to research done by Lovering (1995), adolescents do not have much to say about menstruation in and of itself. Jamdar made the observation in 2012 that there is a "unspoken culture of silence" surrounding the topic of menstruation. The girls avoid talking about menstruation with the other female members of the household because they fear embarrassment and believe that the topic ought to be kept a secret. This is because of the pressure that comes from society. They even use code words for periods since they have always considered having a period to be a horrible experience. As a result, they do not discuss their menstrual health issues with others, such as discomfort or other challenges, which can lead to major health problems. They lack access to fundamental conveniences such as food, water, and sanitary facilities, but most significantly, they are not physically comfortable. Because of the social shame associated with menstrual pads, some women attempt to conceal or bury them, which raises worries about their safety. It is estimated that approximately 53% of homes in India do not have access to a toilet, which "forces women and girls to use communal or public toilets, which may be far away, or else they defecate in the open, increasing women's vulnerability to violence."⁵ In the report⁶, which includes the testimonies of women who live in slums in Delhi, it is alleged that men lurk in public latrines at night in order to rape women. These women's tales support this claim. As a consequence of this, women have a great deal of difficulties and a variety of obstacles when attempting to correctly and usually manage their menstruation.

In many different societies⁷, it is common practice to confine a woman who is menstruating to a separate room, where she is made to sleep on the floor without any adequate bedding. This occurs at a time when the woman's body is already going through a great deal of pain and misery.



Figure 1.1: Myths and challenges faced by women

⁵ Michaud, Martha. "Periods and TV: From Disney to Mean Girls to Big Mouth!". *Your Period Called*. Retrieved 20 November 2020.

⁶ Read, Sara (2013). *Menstruation and the female body in early-modern England* (1st ed.). Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire. ISBN 978-1-137-35502-7. OCLC 852225082.

⁷ Sturm, Circe Dawn (20 March 2002). *Blood Politics: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma*. University of California Press. ISBN 9780520936089 – via Google Books.

Many people have the misconception that girls who menstruate are filthy, cursed, bad, or even carrying the disease. Other cultural taboos include avoiding sour meals out of fear of having a stinky period, not touching particular food items in order to prevent contamination (such as pickles, milk, etc.), and the general idea that menstruation rids the body of polluted or toxic blood. Warm baths, according to one school of thought (UNICEF India 2008), may be hazardous to both the person and the environment since they are thought to help the body purge itself of "negative energy" caused by hot water. Menstrual huts and other taboos were common in ancient primitive cultures. The Huaulu tribe of Indonesia⁸, for example, has a menstrual hut on the edge of their village. According to anthropologists Buckley and Gottlieb, cross-cultural research shows that while taboos about menstruation are nearly universal, a wide range of distinct rules for conduct during menstruation "bespeak quite different, even opposite, purposes and meanings." Meanings are "ambiguous and often multi Even though Huaulu women are required to dwell in these huts while they are menstruating, they are not bound to these structures because they are free to move about the forest as long as they avoid hunting trials. However, they are not allowed to eat with males, and they must bathe in springs that are off limits to men. These rites are carried out in order to protect the guys from any potential danger (Hoskins, 2002). In a similar vein, when a female reaches menarche in Nepal, she is cut off from her community and forbidden to go outside in the sunlight.

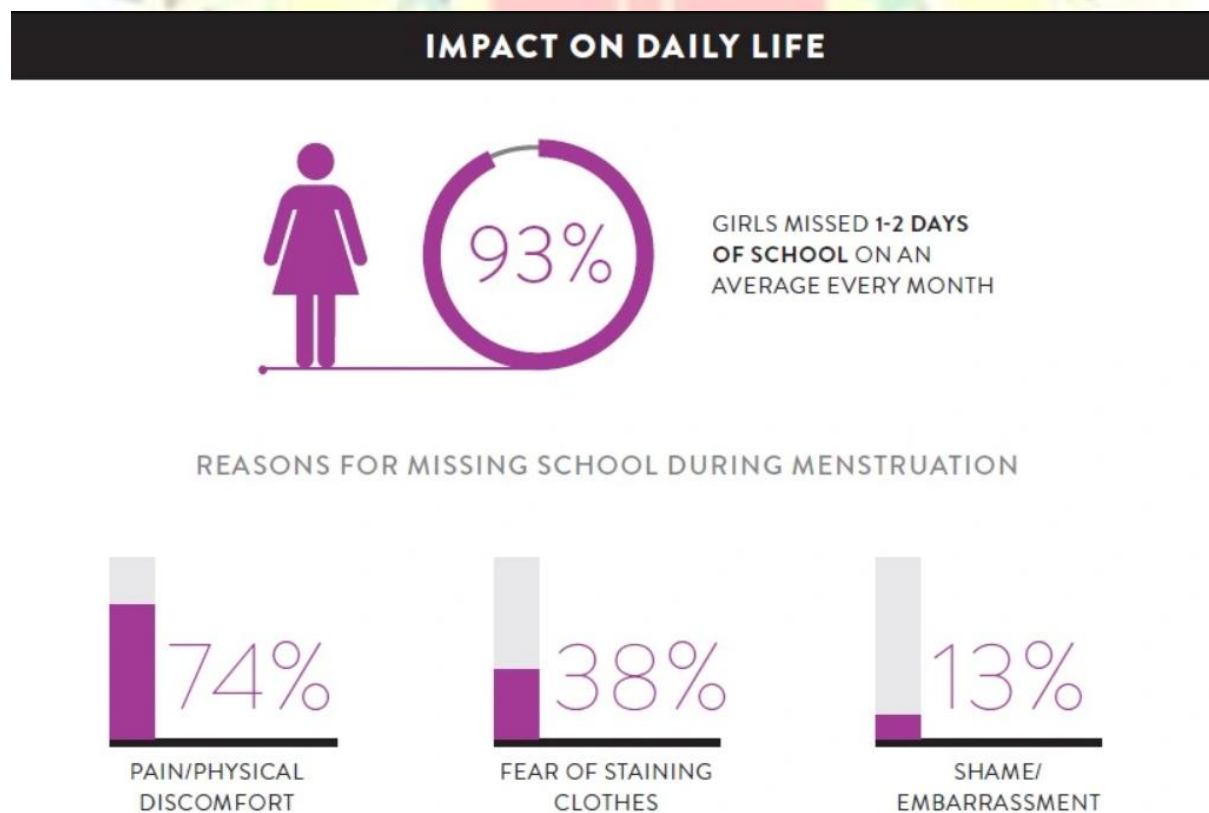


Figure 1.1: Impact on Daily Life

⁸ Romano, Aja (17 March 2022). "Why are people so mad over Pixar's delightful Turning Red?". Vox. Retrieved 2 September 2022.

The women are kept locked up in a room that has been completely darkened, and they are not permitted to walk outside when it is nighttime. At the conclusion of the bleeding, she emerges and is shown her surroundings, including the land, the lake, the flowers, and her pals, as if it were her first time viewing them. Even in modern times, the practice of menstrual huts is common in many parts of Nepal, which contributes to an increased risk of mortality related to menstruation. In addition to the difficulties associated with menstruation, a woman who chooses to use one of these menstrual huts is exposed to a variety of other dangers. Suffocation has been the cause of death for a significant number of Nepali women, who were trying to light a fire in order to keep themselves warm. In a separate occurrence, a young woman in her teens passed away in a menstruation hut after being bitten by a snake. Women who choose to use menstrual huts put themselves at risk of being attacked by animals and facing other hazards. Menstrual huts are still used by several indigenous communities in India, including the Gond and the Madia. Many different cultures and religions encourage the practice of menstrual taboos and are strict with the prohibitions with respect to menstruation on females. This is done regardless of the implications that girls and women are forced to face and suffer from as a result of these practices.

According to the United Nations⁹, human rights are the rights that are inherent to all human beings regardless of their race, sex, religion, caste, or any other status. These rights are universally recognized. An individual possesses a number of fundamental human rights, including the right to life, the right to freedom, the right to freedom of speech, the right to education, and many more rights. All people, regardless of gender, are afforded equal access to these rights, which are free from any and all forms of discrimination. In the event that any person is prevented from exercising their rights, then this becomes a violation of human rights. As was said previously, the practice of menstruation taboos, which can be found in a variety of cultures and religions, is a violation of the fundamental human rights of women in some form or another. It is possible to define menstrual taboos as a form of silent abuse committed against women while they are menstruating. They do not have access to fundamental necessities such as water, food, or sanitation, which has a negative impact on both their physical and mental well-being. As a result of the practice of menstruation taboos, females go through traumatic experiences and endure physical discomfort, which puts their fundamental human rights, such as the right to live, in jeopardy.

It has been said that the human rights are the most important part of the constitution. Article 21 "embodies a constitutional value of supreme importance in a democratic society," as stated by Bhagwati, J., according to the ruling. Iyer, J., has classified article 21 as "the procedural Magna carta protective of life and liberty." Further, paragraph three of article 21 specifies that "no person shall be deprived of his/her life or personal liberty except according to the procedure established by law."¹⁰ On the other hand, women are denied their freedom to live because menstrual taboos are still widely practiced. Because other members of the family regard them to be dirty and unclean, they have been segregated into a different part of the house, and they are not permitted to interact with or communicate with any of the other family members. They are not allowed to take part in family functions or religious functions, and on top of that, they are not allowed to cook, touch food, or enter the kitchen. They are not

⁹ Durkheim, E. 1963. [1898] La prohibition de l'inceste et ses origines. *L'Année Sociologique* 1: 1-70. Reprinted as *Incest. The nature and origin of the taboo*, trans. E. Sagarin. New York: Stuart.

¹⁰ Banerji, Annie (22 May 2018). "Third of girls in South Asia miss school during periods - study". Reuters. Retrieved 2 March 2021.

allowed to participate in family functions or religious functions. Because individuals are required to adhere to these monthly taboos, their concept of personal liberty is hindered as a result of the practices of menstruation taboos.

Females are prevented from using sanitation and hygiene facilities in order to manage their periods as a result of a variety of practices that are tied to menstrual taboos. This has additional repercussions for their general health, particularly the reproductive health of the females. Because of these practices, the risk of sickness and mortality among women of reproductive age is increased. This is because these women are denied access to basic amenities and medical treatment. As a result, this constitutes a breach of the rights to health as well as the rights to water and sanitation. The lack of adequate water and sanitation services for the management of menstruation is of particular importance for women and girls; hence, the human right to water and sanitation for females is an essential requirement for enabling proper menstrual health to be achieved. The human right to sanitation entitles everyone to have physical and affordable access to sanitation as well as providing privacy and ensuring the dignity of the individual. However, the taboos that are practiced do not allow women to change their menstrual materials and use a wash facility, which in turn makes them a victim of gender-based discrimination. Not only is it essential to have access to medical care and treatment, but having a right to health also gives an individual the right to be informed about their sexual and reproductive health, which is inextricably tied to their ability to maintain healthy periods. In addition, because of these taboos, women are discouraged from seeking or getting any type of medical treatment relating to the health and hygiene of their menstrual periods.

Menstrual taboos are prevalent in many different cultures and faiths, and as a result, they violate the fundamental rights of women, which in turn negatively affects a woman's entire physical and psychosocial well-being.

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite progress, challenges persist in eradicating menstrual taboos comprehensively. Deep-rooted cultural beliefs, lack of resources, and resistance to change remain barriers to achieving menstrual equity. Future efforts should focus on sustained advocacy, inclusive policies, and partnerships across sectors to create supportive environments for menstruating individuals worldwide.

Conclusion

Menstrual taboos continue to impact women's health, dignity, and rights globally, highlighting the urgent need for action. By addressing cultural norms, promoting education, and ensuring access to menstrual health resources, we can work towards a world where menstruation is no longer a source of stigma or discrimination but a natural and respected aspect of women's lives.