

10. 'MUTTUTHURAI' A MENSTRUAL PRACTICE AND EXPERIENCES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN RURAL VILLAGES (KOOVALAPURAM, PUDUPATTI, GOVINDANALLUR, POTTALPACHERI) OF MADURAI, TAMILNADU.

M. Gokila,

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Women's Studies,
Bharathiar University

Dr.Kamalaveni,

Associate Professor, Centre for Women's Studies,
Pondicherry University

Abstract

Menstruation is the natural part of the reproductive cycle and is one of the indicators of the onset of puberty amongst adolescent girls. Despite being a phenomenon unique to girls, this has always been surrounded by secrecy and myths that are used to control and discriminate women in many societies (Garg S, Anand T, 2015). The objective of this paper is to document the prevailing socio-cultural menstrual practices and the experiences of adolescent girls in the selected four rural villages of Tamilnadu. A qualitative phenomenological research approach with in-depth one-on-one interview method with semi-structured questionnaire was used. 20 adolescent girls between 15 to 18 yrs were interviewed directly during Jan 2022. The study found that a unique menstrual practice named 'Muttuthurai' is being followed in these villages. The adolescent girls have to spend their days in this 'Muttuthurai' during their menstruation where they have very limited resources and are surrounded by various stigmas. According to 'Integrated model of Menstrual Experience' by (Hennegan J, Shannon AK, Rubli J, Schwab KJ, Melendez-Torres GJ , 2019) these menstrual experiences of shame & containment will have an impact on girls' social participation, Education, Psychological & Physical health. The menstrual myths & taboos play an important role in reproducing gender inequality over and over and act as a big obstacle in the way of women's empowerment. It continues to negatively affect girls' confidence and hinder their ability to manage their menstruation with dignity, safety, and comfort. Dismantling of negative social norms, such as menstrual taboos, is urgently needed to attain broader progress towards gender equality (Wilson E, Haver J, Torondel B, Rubli J, Caruso BA., 2018).

KEYWORDS: Muttuthurai, Menstrual myths & taboos, Gender discrimination, Villages in Madurai District, Adolescent girls' experiences

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Menstruation

Taboos surrounding menstruation exclude women and girls from many aspects of social and cultural life (Garg S, Anand T, 2015). However, scientifically it is known that the actual cause of menstruation is ovulation followed by the missed chance of pregnancy that results in bleeding from the endometrial vessels and is followed by preparation for the next cycle. It is a natural process that first occurs in girls usually between the age of 11 and 14 years and is one of the indicators of the onset of puberty amongst them. Therefore, there seems no reason for this notion to persist that menstruating women are “impure” (ibid). It received the attention of the Ministry of Health only in 2011. Close to 70% percent of Indian women risk getting a severe infection, at times causing death, due to poverty, ignorance, and shame attached to their menstruation cycle” (Sharma P, Singh N, Tempe A, Sharma S., 2018).

1.2 Socio-cultural Myths and Taboos around Menstruation

Many girls and women are subject to restrictions in their daily lives simply because they are menstruating (Garg S, Anand T, 2015). Not entering the “puja” room is the major restriction amongst urban girls whereas, not entering the kitchen is the main restriction amongst the rural girls during menstruation (Puri S, Kapoor S., 2006). They are also restricted from offering prayers and touching holy books. The underlying basis for this myth is also the cultural beliefs of impurity associated with menstruation . It is further believed that menstruating women are unhygienic and unclean and hence the food they prepare, or handle can get contaminated (Garg S, Anand T, 2015).

Cultural norms and religious taboos on menstruation are often compounded by traditional associations with evil spirits, shame, and embarrassment surrounding sexual reproduction (Kaiser, 2008). In some cultures, women bury their clothes used during menstruation to prevent them from being used by evil spirits. In Surinam, menstrual blood is believed to be dangerous, and a malevolent person can harm a menstruating woman or girl by using black magic. It is also believed that a woman can use her menstrual blood to impose her will on a man (Garg S, Anand T, 2015).

In some parts of India, some strict dietary restrictions are also followed during menstruation such as sour food like curd, tamarind, and pickles are usually avoided by menstruating girls (Gupta M, Agarwal N, Agrawal A., 2019). Such foods are said to impede or cease menstrual flow. As far as exercise is concerned, many studies in India and elsewhere have revealed that many adolescent girls believe that doing exercise/physical activity during menses aggravates dysmenorrhoea while real exercise can help relieve menstruating women with symptoms of premenstrual syndrome and dysmenorrhoea and relieve bloating. Exercise also causes a release of serotonin, making one feel much happier. Water is the most common medium of purification . The protection of water sources from such pollution, which is the physical manifestation of Hindu deities, is, therefore, a key concern. This illustrates one probable reason why menstruation women are not allowed to bathe, particularly during the first several days of their monthly period. It is believed that if a girl or woman touches a cow while she is on her period,

the cow will become infertile – leading girls to associate their bodies with curse and impurity (Garg S, Anand T, 2015).

1.3 Impacts of Myths and Taboos on Women and Girl's life

Such taboos about menstruation present in many societies impact girls' and women's emotional state, mentality, and lifestyle, and most importantly, health . There are health and hygiene issues also to consider relating to girls and menstruation (Garg S, Anand T, 2015). Over 77% of menstruating girls and women in India use old cloth, which is often reused. The restriction to keep it secret leads to drying the clothes in secret. Repeated use of unclean cloth and improper drying of used cloth before its reuse results in harbouring of micro-organisms resulting in the spread of vaginal infections amongst adolescent girls (Dhingra R, Kumar A, Kour M, 2009). Further, 88% of women in India sometimes resort to using ashes, newspapers, dried leaves, and husk sand to aid absorption (Garg S, Anand T, 2015). Poor protection and inadequate washing facilities may increase susceptibility to infection, with the odour of menstrual blood putting girls at risk of being stigmatised (Kaiser, 2008). The latter may have significant implications for their mental health (Garg S, Anand T, 2015).

Addressing socio-cultural taboos and misconceptions regarding menstruation is made more difficult by the fact that females have very little knowledge and understanding of puberty, menstruation, and reproductive health. A UNICEF study showed that one in three girls in South Asia had no knowledge of menstruation before their first period (Day H., 2018).

Large numbers of girls in many less economically developed countries drop out of school when they begin menstruating (Garg S, Anand T, 2015). World Bank (2005) showed that girls could miss up to 4 consecutive days of school every month because of their periods, meaning that they missed 10%–20% of school time, which seriously impacted their achievement. This is due to poor menstrual hygiene management (MHM) caused by a lack of information, privacy, washing facilities, and sanitary pads (in Vashisht A, Pathak R, Agarwalla R, Patavegar BN, Panda M., 2018). To achieve gender equality, it is important that girls can attend and reach their full potential in schools. Inadequate options for menstrual hygiene recently received attention as a barrier to education for girls in low and middle-income countries (Sivakami M, van Eijk AM, Thakur H, Kakade N, Patil C, Shinde S, Surani N, Bauman A, Zulaika G, Kabir Y, Dobhal A., 2019 Jun). Also, the cultural and religious taboos made by society make their life vulnerable (Kumari S., 2017). This absence of facilities, coupled with the shame and fear of exposing their menstruation, means that many adolescent girls are forced to miss school during their period; consequently, in many rural resource-poor settings, adolescent girls who are already disadvantaged by social norms miss a quarter of their education opportunities (Day H., 2018).

2. Materials and Methods

A qualitative phenomenological research approach to describe the lived experiences of individuals was used. An in-depth one-on-one interview was done with 20 adolescent girls between 15 to 18 yrs during Jan 2022. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to identify the adolescent girls.

3. Discussions

3.1 Muttuthurai

It is an age-old custom that mandates menstruators to live inside a hut/room in isolation, without any interaction with the people in the village. Each village has a Muttuthurai; all the menstruating women spend their entire cycle there also women have to spend 30 days in the room after childbirth. Even though women dislike this practise, a few wish to talk about it fearing elders. The villages that follow the practice are Koovalapuram, Pudupatti, Govindanallur, Saptur Alagapuri, and Pottalpacheri.

In **Koovalapuram**, the Muttuthurai was present behind the houses. The room was dimly lit, with an asbestos roof and a single window providing little ventilation. While the village had only one Muttuthurai for the entire female population till very recently, a few years ago i.e. in the year 2020, each household that has a menstruating woman collected Rs 1,000 each to build a new room next to the old Muttuthurai. The new room is large and includes a shelf for women to store their items on. A neem tree stands nearby, with sacks hung from it. The sacks contain the clothes, utensils, and other essentials that each woman uses during her menstruation cycle. A few metres from the Muttuthurai is a small cement structure that serves as the toilet for the room's occupants. A malfunctioning hand pump is located outside the toilet. Women only use the restroom at night in emergency situations. Otherwise, they use the fields behind them to relieve themselves.

Govindanallur's Muttuthurai was constructed by the village panchayat funds after the old one was damaged a long time ago. While it cannot be described as well-maintained, the room is larger, with correct electric outlet points, a concrete roof, and a fully functional toilet. In fact, directly in front of it, there is a functioning tap. It is located on the right side of the main road and is one of the first structures you see while entering Govindanallur.

Pottalpacheri's old Muttuthurai was ruined, and no new rooms were built. During menstruation, women in this village stay outside of their homes on the verandas, streets, or under trees or staircases. They stay there regardless of the weather conditions. Women go into the woods to relieve themselves, to change pads, and to fields to bathe and wash their clothes. A family named 'Santhanam' in that village built their own Muttuthurai for the women of their households. "This room is being built for my granddaughter when she attends Menarche in the future," says a grandma looking at a half-built room.

T Pudupatti Muttuthurai had a tiled roof. The toilet was non-functional and is in the construction stage for many years now. Women go into the woods to relieve themselves and to change pads. They bathe during night-time wearing petticoats. The belongings of women were tied inside the room and food was provided from their households.

Why this practise?

“It is a promise, residents say, made in reverence to a Siddhar (holy man), that is binding on these five villages in the vicinity. Any attempt to break the promise will lead to the destruction of these villages”. This practise is followed traditionally for many generations now because they are bound to the words of a saint named ‘Thangamudi saamiyar’. This custom warns that women who do not stay in muttuthurai while menstruating will not bear children. Even though the younger generation does not want to practise the system, they are left with no choice.

3.2 Socio-cultural Practises & Resource Limitations

i. Menstrual Knowledge

Mother was the main source of knowledge for the girls through which the customs and traditions passed on through generations. The stigma around menstruation and enforcement of gender norms restricts the girls from developing knowledge about their natural body process and instead builds shame around it. The girls taught that menstruation is the process where impure blood in the body is released. Out of 20 girls, only 4 were known that it was connected to pregnancy. Even in schools, the subject of menstruation is being skipped.

ii. Challenges to Education

There is no good school near these villages and with very poor transportation facilities girls feel very depressed getting ready for school from Muttuthurai. For these reasons, mothers send the girls to live in hostels for school and college. In fact, even when girls are home for the holidays, they return to the hostels when they get their periods.

Surprisingly people in these villages gave importance to education and so they didn't stop girls from going to school during menstruation, except during the first month of Menarche. Girls also do not take much leave for school since they say they have better toilet & water facilities in school than here. They also say that the population of the village has decreased over the years since the residents sold off their houses here and moved to another village as they did not want their children to go through this practice. Girls never discuss about menstruation and the practices followed with other students as they feel weird as it's not something they're proud of.

iii. Social Participation & Untouchability

Women and girls are treated as untouchables during their menstruation. When a girl starts menstruating, she is not allowed to go anywhere. She is not allowed to bathe for the first 3 days of menarche and not to see or go in front of any men.

During menstruation women/girls are not allowed to attend any good & auspicious functions, social gatherings, or temples, even if they want to go to a bus stop or muttuthurai they cannot take the main road. They have to take a circuitous, almost deserted route to reach the place since the temple is located near the main road. No food is cooked here. Food from home, often cooked by neighbors, is delivered to the women in their utensils. To avoid physical contact, utensils are suspended in sacks on the neem tree. Girls cannot have food whenever or whatever they want. If nutritious foods are provided to them during menstruation is indeed a big question mark. Anyone who comes in physical contact with a menstruating woman/girl needs to take a shower before going back home, for this reason, girls don't ask their father or brother to drop

them in a two-wheeler, instead, they walk. One of the respondent said "Being in the muttuthurai is a matter of shame, especially during public events like temple festivals, and we have relatives from outside the village who are unfamiliar with the customs." Girls feel embarrassed to go in front of the house to ask for something they want, as the guests don't follow all these customs.

iv. **Physical & Economic Environment**

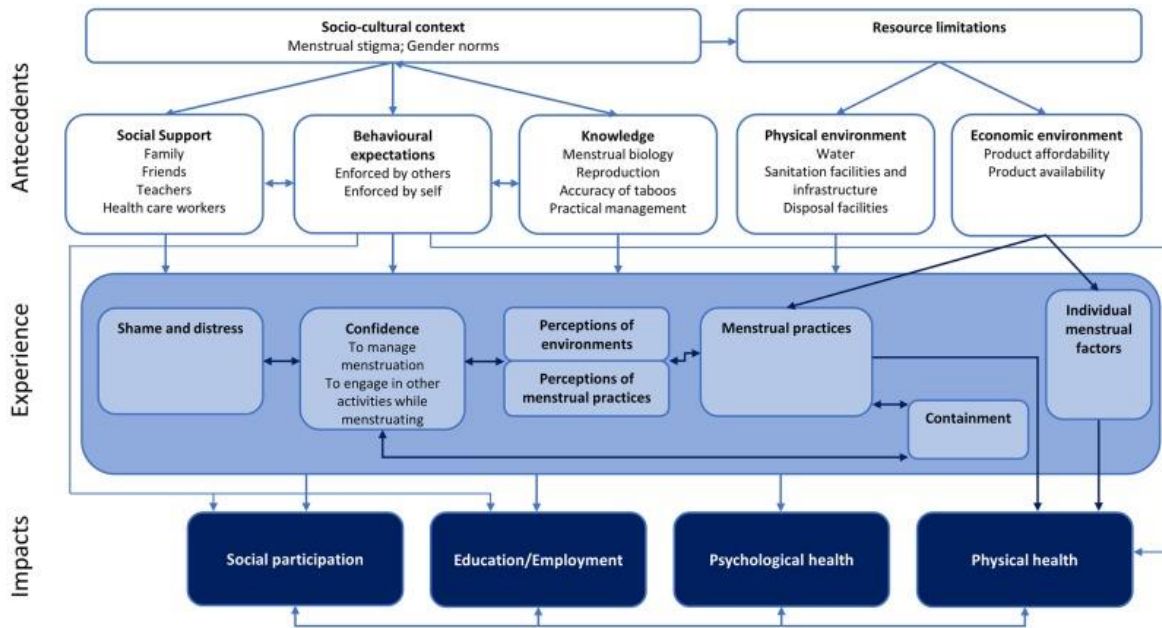
Even though the villages have good water & toilet facilities, they are restricted to women/girls in Muttuthurai as there is no proper maintenance and no one seems to care to make arrangements for that. There is only one store in each village for buying sanitary napkins and if the shop is out of stock it may force them to use clothes for emergencies.

This lack of privacy & proper resources leads women to deal with their menstruation under shame and poor hygiene conditions which bring long-term health effects. Women go far into the fields to relieve themselves or to change napkins. They bathe in an open space outside the room covered in their petticoat. In this regard, one of the girl urged that "You cannot change this practice, however hard you try, but if there is anything you can do for us, please get us toilets at the muttuthurai. It will make our lives easier."

As there is no proper disposal method followed women dispose of their used pads in a pond outside the village called as 'ooruni' or bury them around it and sometimes burn them. Dumping the wastes into the pond for a long time possibly pollutes the environment and brings health hazards.

Integrated Model of Menstrual Experience (Hennegan J, Shannon AK, Rubli J, Schwab KJ, Melendez-Torres GJ, 2019):

The adolescent girls are forced to experience the isolation of being in 'Muttuthurai' during their menstruation where they have very limited resources and are surrounded by various stigmas. According to the below model, these factors & menstrual experiences of shame & containment will have impact on girls' Social participation, Education, psychological & physical health.



4. Conclusion

All these myths & taboos, lack of proper education, and support from family, friends, and teachers about menstruation builds stigma and shame in a girl’s life which affects her confidence, self-esteem and social participation level. This enforcement of cultural practises paves the way for limited resources for women which will affect their physical and psychological health directly or indirectly throughout their life.

Menstruating women and girls' activities are restricted by cultural taboos, and when a lack of sufficient sanitary protection physically prohibits mobility away from home, the onset of menses will certainly have an influence on girls' access to education. Patriarchal social norms associated with menstruation reinforce girls’ future roles as wives and mothers, with menarche traditionally being a sign of fecundity, marriageability, and readiness for sex. Managing the practical and psychological aspects of menstruation is difficult for girls, affecting self-confidence and self-esteem, and the achievement of the wider development goal of women’s empowerment (Muralidharan, 2020). In conclusion, it is essential to overcome the menstrual taboos and it is most important to ensure girls ability to manage the menstrual period. It requires urgent attention to create an environment where menstruation is viewed as a natural and normal part of life without any discrimination.

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ANNEXURE I - PHOTOS

1. KOOVALAPURAM



a) KOOVALAPURAM OLD MUTTUTHURAI



b) KOOVALAPURAM NEW MUTTUTHURAI



**c) KOOVALAPURAM MUTTUTHURAI RESTROOM AND WATER PUMP
WITH NO WATER FACILITIES**

2. POTTALPACHERI



a. POTTALPACHERI OLD MUTTUTHURAI - NOT IN USE



b. THE MUTTUTHURAI THAT WILL BE COMPLETED AND USED WHEN HER GRAND DAUGHTER ATTAINS MENARCHE' A GRANDMA MENTIONED, BUILT NEAR THEIR HOME.



- c. **MUTTUTHURAI BUILT COMMONLY FOR 3 HOUSES OF RELATIVES IN POTTALPACHERI SINCE THE OLD ONE CANNOT BE USED.**

3. PUDUPATTI



- a. **MUTTUTHURAI IN PUDUPATTI VILLAGE**



- b. PUDUPATTI VILLAGE MUTTUTHURAI RESTROOM UNFINISHED FOR
A LONG PERIOD**

4. GOVINDANALLUR



- a. GOVINDANALLUR MUTTUTHURAI CONSTRUCTED BY
GOVERNMENT (PANCHAYAT) FOR PEOPLE OF THAT VILLAGE.**