



Perceptions and practices regarding menstruation: A comparative study in Savara and Jatapu tribal adolescent girls in Srikakulam district

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ABSTRACT

Up until now, poor menstrual hygiene in developing countries has been an insufficiently acknowledged problem. Approximately 50% of the world's population knows from their own experience how important good menstrual hygiene is to be able to function optimally during the menstruation period. This study seeks to determine the status of menstrual hygiene among adolescent tribal girls of Srikakulam district, Andhra Pradesh. A cross-sectional study was conducted on 602 younger women belonging to Savara and Jatapu tribal communities through random sampling method. Demographic and menstrual history and hygiene questionnaires were used for obtaining required information. Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows version 11.0 was used. Majority of the tribal women are getting the menstrual periods regularly, but some of them are experiencing irregular periods. The present study populations are not aware about commercially available sanitary napkins and are using mostly cotton cloth during menstrual periods. The re-usage and delay in changing these clothes are some of the responsible factors to get some infections along with improper cleaning.

INTRODUCTION

WHO has defined Adolescence as the period between 10-19 years of life.[1] Adolescent girls constitute about 1/5th total female population in the world. The onset of menstruation represents a landmark event in pubertal development of the adolescent girl. Menstruation, and the menstrual cycle are characterized by variability in volume, pattern and regularity, which at the earlier stages of the development of the adolescent can create emotional discomfort particularly to the poorly informed girl.[2] Studies have shown that although most girls viewed themselves as being prepared for menarche, having 'discussed this with their mothers', obvious misconceptions on the true physiological process and characteristics of menstruation and the menstrual cycle is evident from these studies.[3,4,5] This to a large extent influences menstrual practices of these adolescent girls. Although menstruation is a natural process, it is linked with several misconceptions and practices, which sometimes result into adverse health outcomes.

Faulty perceptions or misconceptions on menstruation and

menstrual cycle will lead to faulty menstrual practices. Either of these may engender reproductive health problems in the adolescent, such as dysmenorrhoea, gastrointestinal manifestations; depression; and reproductive tract infections which may in turn cause congestive dysmenorrhoea. The objective of the present study is to determine the status of menstrual hygiene among the adolescent tribal girls.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The intension in selecting Srikakulam District is that the government has recognized particularly this district as backward in all aspects especially in health and nutrition aspects. They have low rate of literacy, high percentage of superstitions. Out of 14/38 mandals in Srikakulam district Integrated Tribal Development Project (Seetampeta); seven mandals (Seetampeta, palakonda, kotturu, bhamini, meliyaputti, sarubujjili, hiramandalam) were selected for conducting the study, as these mandals have the highest concentration of scheduled tribes than others. Out of 1164 habitations and in that 108 villages, a total of 56 villages were selected randomly.

The study was conducted among Savara (belonging to the PTG) and Jatapu tribal population of Srikakulam District. For the present study, 602 younger women aged between 15-20 years were selected at random. Using pre-tested, semi-structured, and self administered questionnaire, information was obtained from the study respondents, in respect of the following variables- age; perception on menstruation; practices during menstruation; and medical problems associated with menstruation together with persons with whom these problems were most discussed. Data obtained were collected and analysis performed using SPSS-11 software of the computer.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

200 adolescent girls (100 from Savara and 100 from Jatapu tribes) were selected randomly as respondents. Information about adolescent reproductive health was collected only from younger women aged between 12-20 years. The mean age of savara adolescent women is 15.76 ± 2.42 years and that of Jatapu women is 16.15 ± 2.63 years. Most of these young women are illiterates (Savara- 77.0% and Jatapu women- 80.0%). The mean age at first menstruation, i.e. puberty among savara girls is 12.85 ± 1.37 years and in Jatapu women it is 13.12 ± 1.45 years.

The regularity of the menstrual cycle, duration and menstrual flow disturbances were enquired in the present study (Table-1). Regular menstruation was reported among 54.0% of savara and 74.0% of Jatapu women. It is revealed from the present study that the irregularities are more among savara women (46.0%) than their Jatapu counterparts (26.0%). About 64.0% of Jatapu women and 34.0% of savara women are maintaining the duration of

menstrual cycle for 28 days. Shorter duration of menstrual cycle was reported by 23.0% of savara women and 3.0% of Jatapu women. Relatively prolonged period of menstrual cycle (29-45 days) was experienced by 26.0% of savara and 21.0% of Jatapu women. More irregularities i.e. once in two months or more are observed among 17.0% of savara and 12.0% of Jatapu women. Menstrual blood flow was enquired and the women were categorized into three groups like scanty, moderate and heavy menstrual flow (in relative terms). Heavy menstrual flow was reported by 42.0% of Jatapu and 26.0% of savara women. Only 28.0% of savara and 16.0% of Jatapu women have experience scanty menstrual flow and the rest of the women (46.0% of savara and 42.0% of Jatapu) have reported the moderate menstrual flow.

Muni Susmitha studied the school going adolescent girls of Nellore and found that the menstrual characters similar to that of the present adolescent tribal girls.[6]In the present study, 64.0% of the tribal girls had the regular menstrual cycle like that of the girls of Nellore (62.2%). In the present study sample nearly 76.0% of the girls had an average of 3-5 days of menstrual bleeding, whereas more or less similar findings were observed among the girls of Nellore (77.3%). The adolescent girls of Nellore suffered from dysmenorrhea (28.2%) against 17.5% of the present study. Whereas the study conducted among the adolescent tribal girls of Vizianagaram district, nearly 98.0% of the girls menstruating regularly with out any problem. The duration of menstrual cycle for majority of the adolescent girls of Vizianagaram (89.0%) is 28 days, whereas 34.0% of present savara and 64.0% of Jatapu girls had the similar cycle. In the present study 46.0% of savara and 42.0% of Jatapu girls had the moderate menstrual flow against

Table 1: Regularity, duration of the menstrual cycle and menstrual flow among the adolescent girls

Variables	Savara		Jatapu		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Menstruation occurring						
Regular	54	54.0	74	74.0	128	64.0
Irregular	46	46.0	26	26.0	72	36.0
Duration of menstrual cycle						
< 28 days	23	23.0	3	3.0	26	13.0
28 days	34	34.0	64	64.0	98	49.0
29-45 days	26	26.0	21	21.0	47	23.5
Once in two months or above	17	17.0	12	12.0	29	14.5
Menstrual flow						
Scanty	28	28.0	16	16.0	44	22.0
Moderate	46	46.0	42	42.0	88	44.0
Heavy	26	26.0	42	42.0	68	34.0

54.0% of the tribal girls of Vizianagaram.[7]

During the menstrual period these tribal women are using the pieces of old soft cloth of *saree/dothi* as the menstrual pads. These pieces of cloth may be used for 2-3 cycles, till they were torn and again a fresh bit of cloth from the old *sarees/dothis* will be used. Depending upon the necessity the women used a minimum of 1-2 pieces of cloth upto a maximum of 5-6 pieces during the menstrual period (approximately 5 days). Most of the savara women i.e. 67.0% and 93.0% of Jatapu women have used 3-6 pieces during the menstrual period. The frequency of changing the cloth per day is also enquired and found that 54.0% of savara and 83.0% of Jatapu women have changed the cloth 2-3 times per day. But 46.0% of savara and 17.0% of Jatapu women have changed the menstrual pad once in a day. Most of the savara women (56.0%) have changed the cloth during night time. About 32.0% have changed the menstrual pad whenever it is necessary, whereas 36.0% of Jatapu women changed the menstrual pads during night time or early morning (41.0%) or whenever it is necessary (23.0%). Almost all the women in both the communities have reused the same cloth in the corresponding menstrual period. And after washing the same cloth they will keep the cloth pieces for future use. Nearly 43.0% of Jatapu and 6.0% of savara women felt that the re-usage of cloth may be responsible for the white discharge from vagina. About 53.0% of savara and 23.0% of Jatapu women have not agreed with this opinion. And rest of the women is not sure about the negative consequences of re-usage of cloth in subsequent menstrual periods (Table-2).

Similar to the present study populations, the rural women in Bangladesh, Nepal and even in India use reusable cloths to absorb the menstrual blood. Even in Bangladesh these are usually torn from old saris and known as '*nekra*', but in Telugu they use the

term '*muttu gudda*', which means the polluted cloth. Regarding the facilities, which includes safe water and clean, lack of private toilets (mostly open defecation), coupled with the taboos and embarrassment associated with menstruation, the women do not have proper place to change their cloths and are not always able to wash themselves regularly. Many are unable to wash their cloths adequately and have no place to dry them hygienically, instead they must find secretive, dark places to hide their cloths.[8,9,10] Usage of cloth is the age old practice, not only in these present study populations but also in the majority of the caste populations too in both rural and urban areas of India. A recent study in Maharashtra revealed that majority of the girls in Wardha district using cloth (46.67%) and 15.67% were using sanitary napkins during menstruation.[11] The re-usage of cloth was noticed in 40.33% of girls. In the studies reported from Thane district of Maharashtra more than 3/4th of girls in the rural areas are using cotton cloths and also reusing then after wash.[12,13]

They wash the used cloth with sufficient quantity of water, mostly far away from water sources in secret places (71.0% of savara and 51.0% of Jatapu women). Some of the women wash the sanitary napkins near the stream or far way from open well. Usually the savara women allow the cloth to dry in a secrete place (46.0%) or in a shaded place (22.0%) or back side of the roof of the house (31.0%). Whereas the Jatapu women used to dry the cloth on the bushes located in the backyard (29.0%), or in a shadow place (25.0%) or under direct sun light 18.0% or back side of the house roof (25.0%) or in a secret place (17.0%). Almost all these places are either secret or inaccessible to others. After the complete re-usage the torn menstrual pads will be disposed by putting them in a pit (Savara- 44.0% and Jatapu- 24.0%) or throw away far from village (savara-41.0% and Jatapu-6.0%) or put in a fire (savara-15.0% and Jatapu-13.0%). Majority of the women

Table 2: Sanitary napkin usage particulars among the adolescent girls

Napkin particulars	Savara		Jatapu		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
No.of clothes used in one menstrual cycle						
1-2 pieces	33	33.0	7	7.0	40	20.0
3-4 pieces	57	57.0	49	49.0	106	53.0
5-6 pieces	10	10.0	44	44.0	54	27.0
No. of times changing the cloths/day						
1	46	46.0	17	17.0	63	31.5
2	44	44.0	46	46.0	90	45.0
3	10	10.0	37	37.0	47	23.5
Time of changing the cloths						
At night	56	56.0	36	36.0	92	46.0
Early morning/ Night	12	12.0	41	41.0	53	26.5
When ever necessary	32	32.0	23	23.0	55	27.5
Get white discharge due to use of same cloth						
Yes	6	6.0	43	43.0	49	24.6
No	53	53.0	23	23.0	76	38.2
Don't know	41	41.0	33	33.0	74	37.2

Table 3: Hygienic practices followed during usage of menstrual cloths

Variables	Savara		Jatapu		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Place of washing						
Near stream	20	20.0	32	32.0	52	26.0
Far away from water sources	71	71.0	51	51.0	122	61.0
Far away from well	9	9.0	17	17.0	26	13.0
Dry the cloth						
In a secret place	46	46.0	17	17.0	63	31.5
Under sunlight	-	-	18	18.0	18	9.0
On bushes backside of house	1	1.0	29	29.0	30	15.0
In a shadow place	22	22.0	11	11.0	33	16.5
Backside of roof	31	31.0	25	25.0	56	28.0
After tearing the cloths						
Put some fire and despoiled	15	15.0	30	30.0	45	22.5
Dig in a pit	44	44.0	24	24.0	68	34.0
Throw away far from village	41	41.0	46	46.0	87	43.5
Wash hands after washing cloths						
With water only	55	55.0	38	38.0	93	46.5
With soap	-	-	25	25.0	25	12.5
With ash/ sand	45	45.0	37	37.0	82	41.0

(savara-55.0% and Jatapu- 38.0%) wash their hands with plain water after cleaning the cloth. But some of the women (45.0% of savara and 37.0% of Jatapu) were wash their hands either with ash or with sand. However, some Jatapu women (25.0%) are using soap to wash their hands (Table-3).

About 98.0% of tribal women from Vizianagaram district are reusing the cloth after washing to the next day. Nearly 53.0% of women are reusing the cloth for future menstrual cycles after thorough washing.[7] A study conducted in West Bengal shows that majority of the rural girls preferred cloth pieces rather than sanitary pads as menstrual absorbent. Only 11.25% girls used sanitary pads during menstruation.[9] Almost half of those using cloth used the same set of clothes for more than a month. In rural areas of Andhra Pradesh most of the women do not throw their menstrual clothes, either burn it or burry it in a pit.[14]

During the menstrual period, majority of the women should not take bath. However, 43.0% of savara and 24.0% of Jatapu women had their bath daily even during menstrual period. Some of the women had their bath either on 3rd day (33.0%) or on 5th day (7.5%). Nearly 26.0% of women take the bath only after the menstrual flow was stopped.

In Egypt among the school girls, the different aspects of personal hygiene were generally found to be poor such as not changing pads regularly or at night, and not bathing during menstruation with lack of 'privacy' being an important problem. In another study from Iran, the girl students believed in the effectiveness of personal hygiene or the reduction of severe menstrual pain and 32.0% of them took a bath during the first days

of menstrual period, while 65.0% reported that they have not taken bath.[15] In addition 51.50% reported not taking a bathe for 8 days after the onset of their menstrual period. Even the slum women of Delhi do not bathe during menstruation.[16]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has revealed that perceptions on menstruation among adolescent tribal girls are poor and practices often incorrect. Education regarding reproductive health and hygiene should be included as a part of school curriculum. Better hygienic practices can be adopted by making sanitary pads available at affordable prices.

Before bringing any change in menstrual practices, the girls should be educated about the facts of menstruation, physiological implications, about the significance of menstruation and development of secondary sexual characteristics, and above all, about proper hygienic practices with selection of disposable sanitary menstrual absorbent. This can be achieved through education television programmes, school nurses/ health personnel, compulsory sex education in school curriculum and knowledgeable parents, so that her received education would indirectly wipe away the age-old wrong ideas and make her feel free to discuss menstrual matters including cleaning practices without any hesitation. All mothers irrespective of their educational status should be taught to break their inhibitions about discussing with their daughters regarding menstruation much before the age of menarche.

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