

**MENSTRUATION AND DISCRIMINATION:
WOMEN STRUGGLING THROUGH THE
SHACKLES OF IMPURITY**

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation and the notion of impurity associated with it inflict women falling in the menstruating age with taboos and stigmas, such as disallowing them from touching certain things or object, or participating in religious affairs, etc. when they menstruate. In this empirical study first hand experiences are collected from menstruating women to understand: the extent of menstrual discrimination prevalent in urban India; the nature of discrimination; whether it amounts to untouchability in any form; whether they face any problem in continuing with their daily life when they are menstruating; whether they have access to sanitary hygiene management; and what are the reasons for it.

1. INTRODUCTION

“When men are oppressed, it’s tragedy. When women are oppressed, it’s tradition”¹

The stigma around menstruation has been built up around traditional beliefs in the impurity of menstruating women. They have no place in a constitutional order. These beliefs have been used to shackle women, to deny them equal entitlements and subject them to the dictates of a patriarchal order.²

¹ Letty Cottin Pogrebin, *Deborah, Golda, and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America* (Crown Publishing, 1991).

² J. Chandrachud in *Indian Young Lawyers Association and Ors. v. The State of Kerala and Ors.* (28.09.2018 - SC): MANU/SC/1094/2018.

The practice of isolating menstruating girls and women had killed a 12-year-old in Tamil Nadu. The daughter of an agricultural labourer had got her first period a few days before Cyclone Gaja hit the state. In keeping with a practice common in her community, she was made to live in her family’s thatched cattle shed which was away from the living quarters because menstruating women were considered impure in her community. When the cyclone hit on November 16, the little girl was crushed under a coconut tree that fell on the shed.³

Menstruation is explained as “the cyclical discharge of blood from the uterus of a non-pregnant woman.”⁴ The actual cause of menstruation is ovulation followed by missed chance of pregnancy that results in bleeding from the endometrial vessels and is followed by preparation of the next cycle.⁵ Though menstruation is a normal physiological process, where a taboo has been associated with it, which is strange because menstruation is a sign that the woman is fertile and can bear children. According to Lee⁶, “These taboos have been created by misunderstanding, miseducation, and misrepresentation of women’s menstruation as shamefulness and unclean, therefore affecting women and men’s thinking about menstruation”.

These taboos and stigma around menstruation are deeply rooted in cultural, religious, or societal beliefs and attitudes connote the perceptions that menstruation is something dirty, to be ashamed of, and to be hidden. Women and girls face imposed or self-imposed restrictions on their daily lives during menstruation, such as isolation, abstinence from religious rituals, bathing, touching food for cooking, among

³ *The Financial Express*, “Menstruation taboos are exacting a huge cost from women – from life to health to liberty,” *The Financial Express*, November 23, 2018, available at: <https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/menstruation-taboos-are-exacting-a-huge-cost-from-women-from-life-to-health-to-liberty/1390847/> (last visited 3/4/19).

⁴ *William C. Shiel Jr.*, “Medical Definition of Menstruation,” available at: <http://www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=4355> (last visited 15/4/19).

⁵ Garg, Suneela, and Tanu Anand. “Menstruation related myths in India: strategies for combating it,” 4, 2 *Journal of family medicine and primary care* (2015), doi:10.4103/2249-4863.154627.

⁶ Lee, “Exposing longstanding taboos around menstruation: A crosscultural study of the women’s hygiene product advertising,” presented at the 57th annual conference of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, CA J. (2007, May).

others. These practices, often accepted because they have been practiced for generations are discriminatory, hamper gender equality and impacting women's and girls' dignity.⁷

1.1 Statement of Problem

The problem of this research work pertains to menstruating women, the notion of impurity associated with menstruation and the conflict of equality that results because of taboos and stigmas associated with menstruation, whereby women are unable to continue with their daily life activities, are disallowed from touching certain things or object, participate in religious affairs, and even face difficulties in access to products for sanitary management of their menstruation

1.2 Objective of research

The objective is to get a first hand view from women as to what are their experiences when they are menstruating, to understand :

- a. to what extent menstrual discrimination is prevalent in urban India;
- b. what is the nature of discrimination;
- c. does it amount to untouchability in any form;
- d. do they face any problem in continuing with their daily life when they are menstruating;
- e. do they have access to sanitary hygiene management;

and what are the reasons for it.

1.3 Hypothesis

Menstruation results in discrimination.

1.4 Methodology

The methodology adopted is empirical in this case, using a questionnaire randomly administered to 107 women living in urban areas who fall in menstruating age bracket (10 to 50 years).

⁷ Human Rights Watch and Wash United, Understanding Menstrual Hygiene Management & Human Rights (2017), available at: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/news_attachments/mhm_practitioner_guide_web.pdf (last visited 13/4/19).

1.5 Limitation

Firstly, the questionnaire was in English language and targeted people versed in this language. Secondly, the questionnaire was filled by women residing in urban areas only.

1.6 Literature Review

Yagnik writes, "A status quo of silence pertaining to menstruation has existed since the beginning of the formation of society and culture".⁸ Janice Delaney, et al. in their book, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation*, write "We believe, from the available evidence, that the taboos as taboos were preferably enforced by men, who connected this mysterious phenomenon with the cycles of the moon, the seasons, the rhythm of the tides, the disappearance of the sun in nightly darkness and who feared such cosmic power in the apparent control of a member of their own species... Each primitive society has tended to make the threat of menstrual pollution as concrete as possible. Therefore, to the Maori of New Zealand, the dreaded *Kahukahu* contained in the menses is the personification of the germs of a human being and is capable of inflicting the most extreme harm on men. The Mae Enga believe that contact with menstrual blood or a menstruating woman will "sicken a man and cause persistent vomiting, 'kill' his blood so that it turns black, corrupt his vital juices so that his skin darkens and hangs in folds as his flesh wastes, permanently dull his wits, and eventually lead to a slow decline and death."⁹

Suneela Garg and Tanu Anand in their article "Menstruation related myths in India: Strategies for Combating it"¹⁰ discuss the myths related to menstruation in India. They write that in many parts of India, menstruation is still considered to be dirty and impure and even the mere mention of the topic has always been a taboo and the

⁸ Yagnik, "Construction of negative images of menstruation in Indian TV commercial," 33Health Care for Women International" (2012).

⁹ Janice Delaney, et al., *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (University of Illinois Press, 1988).

¹⁰ Garg, Suneela, and Tanu Anand. "Menstruation related myths in India: strategies for combating it," 4, 2 Journal of family medicine and primary care (2015), doi:10.4103/2249-4863.154627.

cultural and social influences appear to be a hurdle for advancement of knowledge on the subject.¹¹ They trace the origin of this myth back to the Vedic times, where it is linked to Indra's slaying of Vritras. It was declared in the Veda that the guilt of killing a "brahmana-murder", appears every month as menstrual flow because women had taken upon themselves a part of Indra's guilt.¹² Further, women of Hindu faith are prohibited from participating in normal life while they are menstruating. She must be 'purified' before she is allowed to return to her family and day to day chores of her life.

Janet Chawla¹³ quotes *historian N.N.Bhattacharyya, according to whom, "different areas of India have had notions of the menstruating goddess. In Punjab, it was believed that Mother Earth ('Dharti Ma') 'slept' for a week each month. In some parts of the Deccan after the 'navaratra' goddess temples were closed from the tenth to the full moon day while she rests and refreshes herself. In Malabar region, Mother Earth was believed to rest during the hot weather until she got the first shower of rain. Still today in the Kamakhya temple of Assam and in parts of Orissa the rituals of the menstruation of the goddess are celebrated during the monsoon season."* She writes that in many cultures across the Indian subcontinent, the menstrual cycle was [seen](#) as a gift and when a girl would menstruate for the first time, it would be celebrated in public with much pomp and splendor. She observes this as problematic, as the menstrual cycle was seen as a boon for reproduction and when people celebrated it, they had a reductionist view that a woman's ultimate goal in life is reproduction. Chawla's paper demonstrates dominant patriarchal notions regarding women's bodies have religious origins.

¹¹ Patil R, Agarwal L, Khan MI, Gupta SK, Vedapriya DR, Raghavia M, et al., "Beliefs about menstruation: A study from rural Pondicherry," *Indian J Med Specialities* 2011.

¹² Chawla J, "The Mythic Origins of the Menstrual Taboo in the Rig Veda" *Matrika* (1992), available at: <http://www.matrika-india.org/Research/MythicOrigins.html> (last visited 12/4/19).

¹³ Chawla, "Mythic Origins of Menstrual Taboo in Rig Veda." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1994.

Arpan Shailesh Yagnik in "Reframing Menstruation in India: Metamorphosis of the Menstrual Taboo with the Changing Media Coverage", writes, that menstruation is deemed as an antisocial taboo because of its direct and indirect effects on women and the society. "It hampers the progress and development of the society. Also under the pretext of maintaining a social order, it disrupts it. And since silence is conveniently chosen over the awkwardness of discussing menstruation, it also disrupts the information and communication flow within the society."¹⁴ The adherence to the menstrual taboo often leads to health issues, female illiteracy, and lack of professional employment opportunities, all of which can be rendered as antisocial. They hamper the progress of a nation especially one like India. She quotes Fernandez¹⁵ according to whom an average women in her lifetime needs 7,000 sanitary pads to address the issue of menstruation. However, most women in India use traditional means of dealing with menstruation. Only 7% to 10% of the women use sanitary pads¹⁶. Many employ tree bark, husk, ash, plastic bags, and old rags to deal with menstruation. She emphasises that it is because of these unsanitary practices that women suffer from multiple infections in their reproductive and urinary tract which at times result in cervical cancer, sterility and in cases the death of the woman.¹⁷

The menstrual taboo undermines the value of women. There is a lack of provision, within cultures and societies, for imparting the right information about menstruation as a perfectly normal physiological process. This in turn manifests and fosters an environment of confusion, dilemma and at times trauma¹⁸. Women suffer from intense

¹⁴ Arpan Shailesh Yagnik, "Reframing Menstruation in India: Metamorphosis of the Menstrual Taboo With the Changing Media Coverage," 35:6 *Health Care for Women International*, (2014), DOI: 10.1080/07399332.2013.838246.

¹⁵ Fernandez, "Breaking the silence: Menstrual hygiene management in rural India," presented at World Water Week, Stockholm, Sweden (5 September 2010).

¹⁶ Dasgupta, and Sarkar, "Menstrual hygiene: How hygienic is the adolescent girl?" 33(2) *Indian Journal of Community Medicine* (2008).

¹⁷ Arpan Shailesh Yagnik, "Reframing Menstruation in India: Metamorphosis of the Menstrual Taboo With the Changing Media Coverage," 35:6 *Health Care for Women International*, (2014), DOI: 10.1080/07399332.2013.838246.

¹⁸ Yagnik, 33 "Construction of negative images of menstruation in Indian TV commercial. *Health Care for Women International*," (2012).

shame and stigma because of it and are subjected to worse treatments and restrictions when they are menstruating¹⁹.

Suneela Garg and Tanu Anand write that the underlying basis for many of the restrictions imposed upon women is the cultural beliefs of impurity associated with menstruation. It is believed that menstruating women are unhygienic and unclean and hence the food they prepare or handle can get contaminated. Further, Hinduism centers on the notions of purity and pollution. Bodily excretions are believed to be polluting, as are the bodies when producing them. All women, regardless of their social caste, incur pollution through the bodily processes of menstruation and childbirth. Water is considered to be the most common medium of purification. The protection of water sources from such pollution, which is the physical manifestation of Hindu deities is seen as a concern.²⁰ This highlights the possible reason why menstruating women are not allowed to take a bath especially for first few days of their menstrual period.²¹

According to study by Kumar and Srivastava²² in 2011, participating women reported that during menstruation the body emits some specific smell or ray, which “turns preserved food bad. And, therefore, they are not allowed to touch sour foods like pickles.” It should be noted that as long as general hygiene measures are taken into account, no scientific test has shown menstruation as the reason for spoilage of any food in making.

Cultural norms and religious taboos on menstruation are often compounded by traditional associations with evil spirits, shame and embarrassment surrounding sexual reproduction.²³ In some cultures, women bury their cloths used during menstruation to prevent them being used by

evil spirits.²⁴ In Surinam, menstrual blood is believed to be “dangerous, and a malevolent person can do harm to a menstruating woman or girl by using black magic. It is believed that a woman can use her menstrual blood to impose her will on a man.”²⁵ However, there seems to be no logical or scientific explanation for this.”

Many adolescent girls believe that doing exercise or physical activity during menstruation aggravates dysmenorrhea or menstrual cramps but the truth is that exercise can help relieve the menstruating women with symptoms of premenstrual syndrome and dysmenorrhea and relieve bloating. Exercise also causes a release of serotonin, the hormone that makes one feel happy.²⁶

A Study by UNICEF India²⁷ in the state of Uttar Pradesh found that “girls had low levels of knowledge about and unfavourable attitudes around menstruation and reproductive health. Boys, who tend to learn about menstruation only after marriage, had even more limited knowledge. Overall, the formative study highlighted the need for interventions that address the ‘culture of silence’ that surrounds menstruation.” The baseline study confirmed and expanded on the findings of the formative study. The study results identified critical gaps in knowledge around the physiological process of menstruation and related hygiene practices. The findings underscored the influence of social norms, such as the pervasive belief that menstruating girls and women are unclean, which in turn served to restrict girls’ activities.

¹⁹ Montgomery, R. E. “A cross-cultural study of menstruation, menstrual taboos, and related social variables,” 2 *Ethos* (1974).

²⁰ Wateraid.org, “Module one: Menstrual Hygiene Basics” (2012); Ten VT., “Menstrual hygiene: A neglected condition for the achievement of several millennium development goals,” Europe External Policy Advisors (2007).

²¹ Garg, Suneela, and Tanu Anand. “Menstruation related myths in India: strategies for combating it,” 4, 2 *Journal of family medicine and primary care* (2015), doi:10.4103/2249-4863.154627.

²² Kumar A, Srivastava K., “Cultural and social practices regarding menstruation among adolescent girls,” 26 *Soc Work Public Health* (2011).

²³ Stefanie Kaiser, “Menstrual Hygiene Management” (2008).

²⁴ UNICEF, “Bangladesh: Tackling menstrual hygiene taboos,” Sanitation and Hygiene Case Study No. 10. 2008, available at: https://www.unicef.org/wash/files/10_case_study_BANGLADESH_4web.pdf (last visited 15/4/19).

²⁵ Wateraid.org, “Module one: Menstrual Hygiene Basics” (2012); Ten VT., “Menstrual hygiene: A neglected condition for the achievement of several millennium development goals,” Europe External Policy Advisors (2007).

²⁶ Sadiq MA, Salih AA, “Knowledge and practice of adolescent females about menstruation in Baghdad,” *J Gen Pract* (2013); Poursalami M, Osati-Ashtiani F., “Assessing knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of adolescent girls in suburban districts of Tehran about dysmenorrhoea and menstrual hygiene,” *J Int Womens Stud* (2002).

²⁷ Alka Malhotra, “Psychosocial factors and gender norms around menstruation and their effects on girls’ self-confidence” UNICEF (2014).

A Study by London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (2014)²⁸ on “The health impact of menstrual hygiene management on women of reproductive health and its implications for schoolgirls” found that “approximately 60 per cent of women diagnosed with BV and UTIs were found to use reusable cloth and women who reported using reusable cloth were 1.5 times and 2.0 times more likely to experience BV and UTIs, respectively, compared to women who use disposable pads.”

Swapna Mazumdar²⁹, [says](#), “Talking about menstruation has been a taboo even among planners. It received the attention of the Ministry of Health only in 2011. Close to 70% per cent of Indian women risk getting severe infection, at times causing death, due to poverty, ignorance and shame attached to their menstruation cycle”.

A [survey](#)³⁰ conducted in 2011, it was revealed that in north India, over 30% of the girls interviewed dropped out of school after they start menstruating. Cultural neglect of menstrual hygiene is reflected in policies as a larger number of adolescent girls (between 12-18 years of age) miss [five days](#) of school due to lack of toilets for girls.

Dr Rani Bang in her [book](#), *Putting Women First: Women And Health In Rural Community*³¹ notes that women in rural communities have very little knowledge about menstrual health. She says, “Cultural perceptions such as colour of the menstrual blood govern their perception of what is normal and abnormal. They resist using sanitary napkin because it is difficult to dispose them off. They fear it might fall into the hands of someone who can use *Jaduwala* (black magic) against them.”³²

²⁸ London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, “The health impact of menstrual hygiene management on women of reproductive health and its implications for schoolgirls” (2014).

²⁹ Swapna Majumdar, “Breaking the cycle of silence & shame,” *The Tribune*, July 30, 2014, available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/2014/20140730/edit.htm#6> (last visited 15/3/19).

³⁰ Kounteya Sinha, “70% Can’t afford sanitary napkins, reveals study,” *The Times of India*, Jan 23, 2011, available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/70-cant-afford-sanitary-napkins-reveals-study/articleshow/7344998.cms> (last visited 11/4/19).

³¹ Rani Bang, *Putting Women First: Women And Health In Rural Community* (Bhatkal & Sen, 2010).

³² [Kena Holkar](#), “How The Taboo Around Menstruation Is Rooted In Religion And Culture” (2018), available at:

Chitra Karunakaran Prasanna in “Claiming the public sphere: Menstrual taboos and the rising dissent in India” writes, that feminists and legal activists have started questioning the widespread practices of menstrual taboos and the need to place limits on menstruating women’s entry to places of worship and the public sphere. The activism around menstruation that has erupted in protests and legal challenges which seek to reaffirm women’s right to control their own bodies and for their monthly menstruation to be free from social and religious practices which in effect involve segregation, exclusion and often humiliation.³³

Juyal, Kandpal, and Semwal in “Menstrual Hygiene and Reproductive Morbidity in Adolescent Girls in Dehradun, India”, did a cross-sectional study undertaken in school going unmarried adolescent girls to know their menstrual hygiene practices as well as reproductive morbidity. The **results showed that** approximately 65 % of the girls reported having dysmenorrhoea and 19 % of the girls had given the history of excessive vaginal discharge with or without low backache/lower abdominal pain. Strong association was also found between Reproductive Tract Infections and poor menstrual hygiene.³⁴

Mandal, Divya & Balodi, Geeta conducted a study in Charba (Reda) village, District Dehradun. The data of the study revealed that 52% study subjects were not aware of the reason behind occurrence of menstruation while 28.67% believed menstruation it to be a curse of God. Majority of the girls were not aware of uterus being the source of blood flowing during the menstrual cycle of the same.³⁵

Shanbhag, Deepthi & Shilpa, R & D'Souza, N & Josephine, P & Singh, J & Goud, B.R. in “Perceptions regarding

<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2018/05/why-do-we-need-to-break-the-silence-around-menstrual-taboo/> (last visited 2/4/19).

³³ Chitra Karunakaran Prasanna, “Claiming the public sphere: Menstrual taboos and the rising dissent in India.”

30:3 *Agenda*, (2016) DOI: 10.1080/10130950.2016.1251228.

³⁴ Juyal, R., Kandpal, S., & Semwal, J., “Menstrual Hygiene and Reproductive Morbidity in Adolescent Girls in Dehradun, India” 13(2) *Bangladesh Journal of Medical Science* (2014).

³⁵ Mandal, Divya & Balodi, Geeta, “Menstrual Hygiene: Knowledge, Practise And Restrictions Amongst Girls Of Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India” 3 *G.J.I.S.S* (2014).

menstruation and Practices during menstrual cycles among high school going adolescent girls in resource limited settings around Bangalore city, Karnataka, India” assessed the perceptions and practices regarding menstrual hygiene among selected high school girls. Their study found that 73.7% knew that menstruation was a normal phenomenon but only 28.7% had knowledge regarding menstruation. 48.1% did not know that menstruation was related to pregnancy. Only 44.1% used sanitary pad during the menstrual cycles. Among those who used cloth, only 31.3% used soap and water to clean them.³⁶

Khanna, Goyal, and Bhawsar, in “Menstrual Practices and Reproductive Problems: A Study of Adolescent Girls in Rajasthan” write, that ignorance, false perceptions and unsafe practices regarding menstruation are not uncommon among adolescents in the study area, having serious implications for reproductive and sexual health. Their study demonstrated that among the determinants for reproductive morbidity, practices during menstruation appear to be the most dominant factor. The findings reinforce the need to bring them out of traditional beliefs, misconceptions and restrictions, and encourage safe and hygienic practices.³⁷

Behera, Sivakami, and Behera in “Menarche and Menstruation in Rural Adolescent Girls in Maharashtra, India: A Qualitative Study” found that most of the participants, especially girls without menarche lacked adequate knowledge about menstruation and its processes. All communications regarding menstruation were between friends, whereas mothers were found to be playing a limited role. Some of the girls were using sanitary pads, while most girls still use old cloths. Financial concerns and difficulty in obtaining sanitary pads were major obstructions for their

use. Lack of awareness and appropriate care for menstrual morbidities were reported among these girls, which put impact on their educational attainment.³⁸

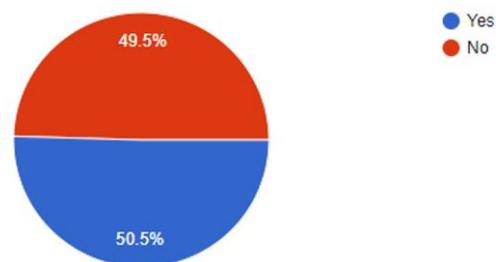
Inga T. Winkler and Virginia Roaf in “Taking the Bloody Linen out of the Closet – Menstrual Hygiene as a Priority for Achieving Gender Equality” write, “Women in detention often face appalling conditions for the management (or rather non---management) of their menstruation. The requirements of women managing their menstruation have not been thought about in prison and detention policies. But beyond neglecting their needs, women are sometimes deliberately denied access to facilities and materials needed to manage menstruation.”³⁹

2. FINDINGS FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE

A. Of Facing Menstrual Discrimination

Question 1: According to UN experts, persistent harmful socio-cultural norms, stigma, misconceptions and taboos around menstruation, continue to lead to exclusion and discrimination of women and girls. Have you ever faced any stigma/taboo related to menstruation?

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:



³⁶ Shanbhag, Deepthi & Shilpa, R & D'Souza, N & Josephine, P & Singh, J & Goud, B.R. “Perceptions regarding menstruation and Practices during menstrual cycles among high school going adolescent girls in resource limited settings around Bangalore city, Karnataka, India,” 4 International Journal of Collaborative Research on Internal Medicine and Public Health (2012).

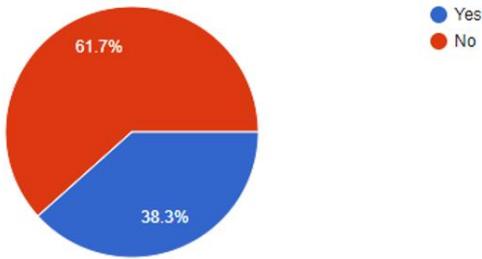
³⁷ Khanna, A., Goyal, R. S., & Bhawsar, R., “Menstrual Practices and Reproductive Problems: A Study of Adolescent Girls in Rajasthan” , 7(1) Journal of Health Management (2005)
<https://doi.org/10.1177/097206340400700103>.

³⁸ Behera, D., Sivakami, M., & Behera, M. R., “Menarche and Menstruation in Rural Adolescent Girls in Maharashtra, India: A Qualitative Study,” 17(4) Journal of Health Management (2015),
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0972063415612581>.

³⁹ Inga T. Winkler and Virginia Roaf, “Taking the Bloody Linen out of the Closet – Menstrual Hygiene as a Priority for Achieving Gender Equality,” Cardozo Journal of Law and Gender (2014).

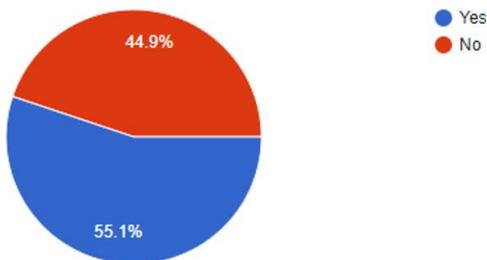
Question 2: Have you ever felt discriminated while/ because you were menstruating?

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:



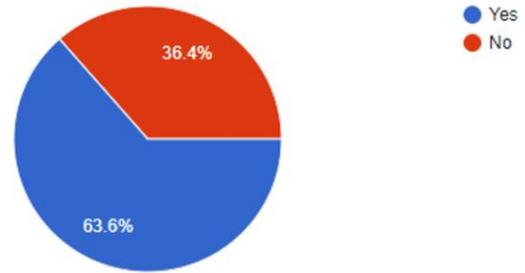
Question 3: Are you disallowed to touch certain things while you are menstruating?

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:



Question 4: Are you disallowed from entering certain places while you are menstruating?

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:



Question 5: What sort of discrimination have you faced? Please mention the things you are not allowed to touch and the places you are not allowed to visit.

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:

Going to temples, holy places, mosques, graveyard/ worshipping	57 responses i.e. 53.27%
Touching religious or holy books, sacred things, sacred plants, idols	36 responses i.e. 33.64%
Going to kitchen	2 responses i.e. 1.87%
Touching kitchen utensils	3 responses i.e. 2.80%
Touching pickles	10 responses i.e. 9.35%
Keep fasts	1 response i.e. 0.9%
Touching cooked meals	1 response i.e. 0.9%

Touching food offered in religious ceremonies	1 response i.e. 0.9%
Eat sour food	1 response i.e. 0.9%
Not faced anything personally	28 responses i.e. 26.17%

Note: Many of the responses fell in a number of above categories.

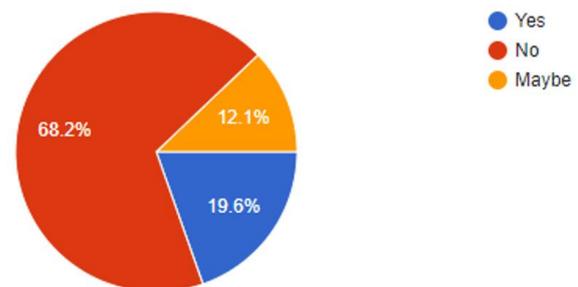
Some interesting responses received were:

- i. “I have only faced one major form of discrimination when during Navratri aunties in colony stooped calling me and other girls of my age(13 above) for navratri bhoj(prasad) bcoz they assumed that all girls above 13 menstruate.”
- ii. “At school, there were times I had blood stains on my skirt. I had to be extremely hushy hushy about it.”
- iii. “No one stops me from touching a my thing but I tend to not touch Quran and attend religious places. Though I am a Muslim but I tend to avoid visiting temples too if I have periods.”
- iv. “As a women menstrates i.e.blood comes out from her body continuously so wudhu which is a basic part of performing namaz or reading Quran becomes invalid due to mensuration so this is the only reason a women is not allowed to perform namaz or read Quran or enter in a mosque”
- v. I have been told to never show any signs that would make a guy realize that I am on my period(for eg: not to make it obvious that I am on my

- menstrual cramps) or never tell the word pad in front of them”
- vi. “Not allowed to enter temples or touch things relating to God. Now that the family has started thinking of logic behind actions, it has stopped.”
- vii. “not allowed to jump over a grass fence ,cause people say plants might die .”
- viii. “I have not faced discrimination. I have faced a lack of clean sanitation during school days . Bathrooms had no lights, door locks, bins.”
- ix. “I’m not allowed to touch our Holy Book or enter sacred or religious places while I’m mensurating. It's gives a sense of lower self esteem.”
- x. “Earlier I was under the impression that I was not allowed to touch the religious text when I was menstruating but that was basically a misconception.”

Question 6: Does this discrimination amounts to untouchability in any form?

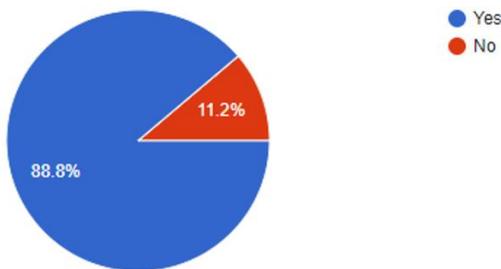
The responses collected from the participants are as follows:



B. Of change in attitude towards the menstruation related discrimination with time

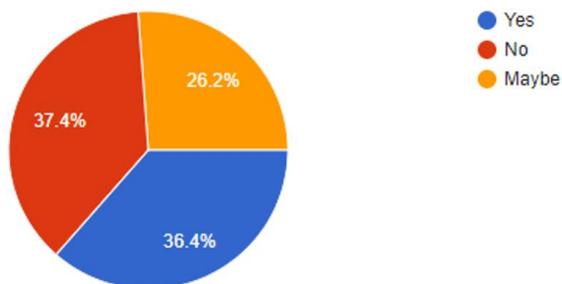
Question 7: Do you feel the discrimination/untouchability has lessened with time?

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:



Question 8: Were your mother and other female relatives also discriminated because of menstruation?

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:



Question 9: Do you feel there has been a change in attitude towards the stigma related to menstruation?

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:

Yes	72
Somewhat/Slight/Little	14
Negligible	1
May be	3
No	10

Note: Some were descriptive and would not fit in any of the above categories.

C. Of Seeking reasons for Menstrual Discrimination

Question 10: Menstruation is an essential biological process that allows a woman to bear children. Yet they face stigma, taboo in regard to it. Why do you think women face such discrimination? Please list down your reasons.

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:

Superstitions/blind faith/myths/ misconceptions	13 responses
Lack of awareness	13 responses
Lack of education	18 responses
Patriarchy	22 responses
Religious and cultural reasons	9 responses
Hygiene	1 response

Impurity	11 responses
Not discussing openly/ shame	3 responses
Old thinking/mentality	8 responses
Fear of breaking traditions	8 responses
To give rest to women	4 responses
Women themselves/not wanting to change	3 responses
Don't know	2 responses
No reason	5 responses

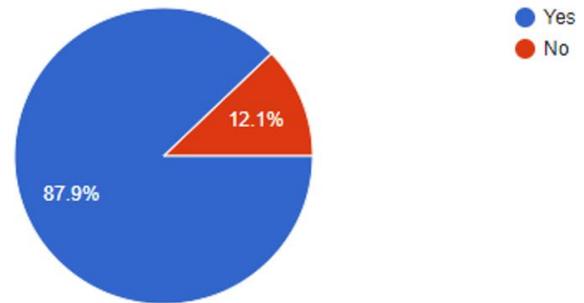
Note: Many of the responses fell in a number of above categories.

Few interesting responses:

- i. "Due to the insensitivity from male gender which may due to a number of reasons such as lack of education and awareness. Stigma of not discussing things related to sexuality and sexual organs. Religious scriptures composed by males also have a biased attitude towards women's sexuality and biological processes such as mensuration."
- ii. "We as a society fail to educate our boys, on such issues. We fail to humanize women. Boys need to be taught that their mother and sisters, go through such biological processes and they're natural. There's nothing disgusting about the circle of life."

Question 11: Would you say that the stigma/ taboo around menstruation is because of the patriarchal society we have in India?

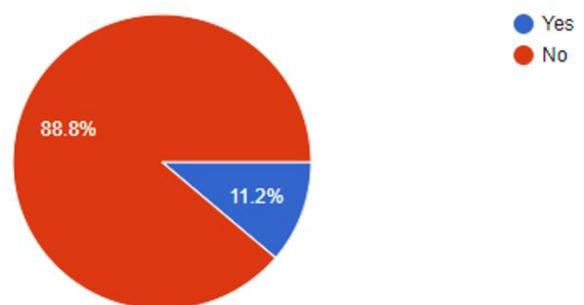
The responses collected from the participants are as follows:



D. Of Menstrual Hygiene Management

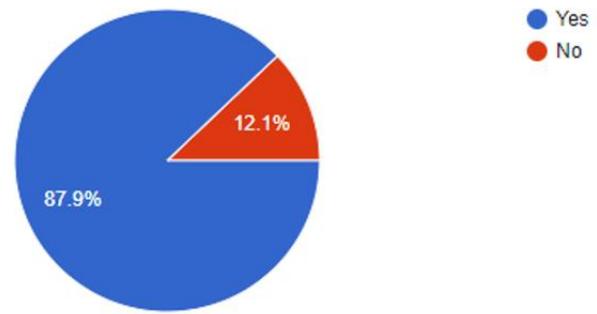
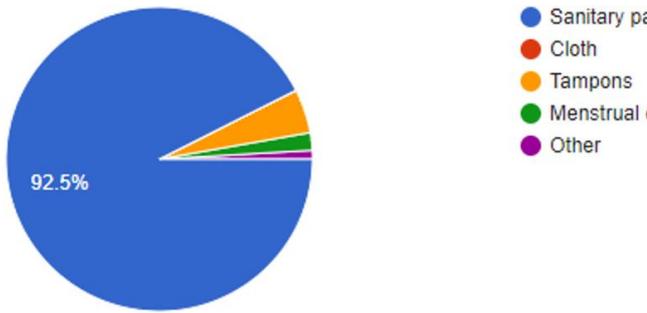
Question 12: The stigma and shame generated by stereotypes around menstruation have severe impacts on all aspects of women's and girls' human rights. Vulnerable women can be forced to use improvised, unhygienic materials that may cause leaking and infection, putting their health at serious risk. Do you face any difficulty in accessing safe and hygienic menstrual blood absorbents?

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:



Question 13: What do you use?

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:

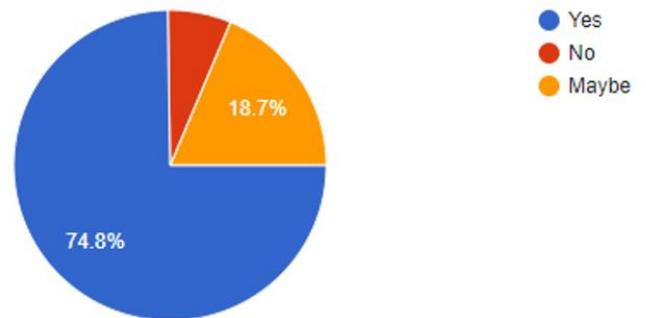
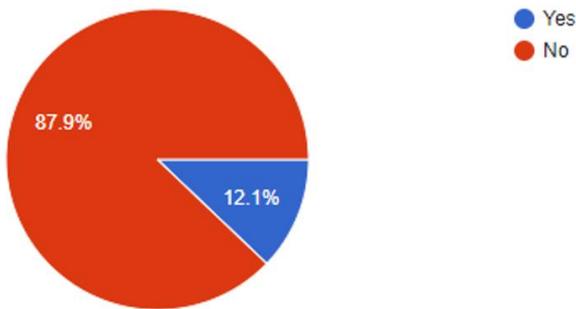


Question 14: Do you face any problem in disposing the used menstrual blood absorbent?

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:

Question 16: Do you think it is time to challenge the religious institutions and modify them with more humanitarian ones, ones that treat women and men at par?

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:



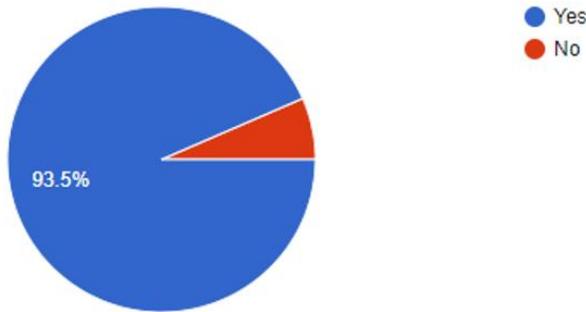
E. Of Seeking Solutions

Question 15: In the Sabrimala verdict the Supreme Court of India allowed the entry of women of menstruating age to the temple. Do you see this as a stepping stone towards removal of inequalities women face especially because of menstruation?

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:

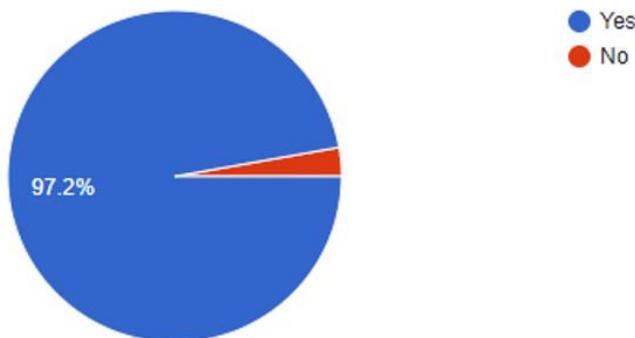
Question 17: Women in Kerala are demanding a law to end menstruation related untouchability/discrimination. Do you feel we need to bring in such a law?

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:



Question 18: Can the menstruation related stigma be dissolved through awareness?

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:



Question 19: Do you have any suggestions to put an end to the menstruation related stigma?

The responses collected from the participants are as follows:

Education/ Sex education	9 responses
Acknowledging menstruation as a normal process	13 responses
Open discussions	6 responses
Spreading awareness	16 responses

Note: This was an optional question, and a few responses were not suggestions.

A few noteworthy responses received:

- i. “More and more discussion is needed especially with women of age group 40 and above in small towns. They are the ones who force their daughters to do/ not do certain things while menstruating. If their mindset can be changed, there will be results across generations. Even young boys can be involved so that they can stand up for their sisters.”
- ii. “Ask mother's not to tell her daughter if she got her periods then she can't tell her father or brother about it once this is done every family can talk about it freely.”
- iii. “...Shops need to stop selling sanitary pads etc in newspapers/black plastic bags.”
- iv. “Stop telling your daughters that its something you should hide or not discuss about. Menstruation is a natural phenomenon and its nothing they should be ashamed of.”
- v. “Take it as blessing rather than a bane because it enables women to bring in this world another life.”

3. ANALYSIS

A. Of Facing Menstrual Discrimination

From the data collected we saw that, though only 50.5% women had faced any menstrual related taboos, only 38.3% said they have faced such discrimination while they were menstruating. Interestingly, 55.1% said they were disallowed from touching certain things and 63.6% said they were disallowed from touching certain things. When these last two figures are compared with the figures stating that 38.3% have faced such discrimination, a striking analogy can be noted. One reason for this can be that these disallowances have been so normalised that women do not feel they are being discriminated. Further when women were asked if the discrimination they face amounts to untouchability with 19.6% saying yes, 64.2% saying no and 12.1% saying may be.

When asked as to what kind of discrimination women faced, responses from the women stated that many were not allowed to go to temples or other religious places, or touch things considered sacred or of religious nature, they were not allowed to enter the kitchen or touch kitchen utensils, and pickles. One woman wrote that she was not allowed to sleep on the common bed. Another woman wrote that she was not allowed to jump over a grass fence, "because people say plants might die".

B. Of change in attitude towards the menstruation related discrimination with time

88.8% women said that the menstrual discrimination has lessened with time, and that while 36.4% said that their mothers and female relatives were also discriminated because of menstruation, 37.4% people said "No" and 26.2% said "May be". To the question whether the women felt there has been a change in attitude towards the stigma related to menstruation, about 79.4% replied in affirmation with their answers varying from "yes" to "a little bit".

So clearly there is a change in attitude towards the menstruation related discrimination in time and gradual decline in discrimination can be noted from the responses.

C. Of Seeking reasons for Menstrual Discrimination

A variety of answers were received to the question why they thought women faced such discrimination. "Lack of education" and "lack of awareness" were the top replies of majority of women, followed by "patriarchy". Some other cited "impurity", "religious" reasons, while a few pointed out that initially it was done to give women a few days rest but that gradually took a hue of impurity.

Also, a direct question was put across the women, whether they would say that the stigma/ taboo related to menstruation were because of the patriarchal nature of society we have in India, 87.9% said yes.

D. Of Menstrual Hygiene Management

From the questions put to women relating to menstrual hygiene management, a trend could be observed that in urban areas women do not any longer find any difficulty in accessing menstrual blood absorbents (88.8% saying they face no difficulty), with 92.5% women using pads, 4.7% using tampons and 1.9% using menstrual cups, all of which are considered safe and hygienic products. Further 87.9% felt no problem in disposing off such used absorbents.

E. Of Seeking Solutions

87.9% of women said that they saw the Supreme Court of India's verdict holding bar on entry of women belonging to the menstruating age as a stepping stone towards removal of inequalities and 74.8% women said that it is now time to challenge religious institutions and modify them with more humanitarian ones, ones that treat women and men at par (6.5% said "No" and 18.7% said "May be").

93.5% of women said that there is a need to bring a law to end the menstruation related untouchability/discrimination. This figure can be compared with an earlier question's response where only 19.6% of women said that the menstruation related discrimination amounted to untouchability.

Further a whopping 97.2% of the women said that menstruation related discrimination can be solved through awareness. The solution lies in sex education, open discussions with the opposite gender and telling women not to force upon their daughters to do certain things or not to do certain things. As one woman writes, "Stop telling your daughters it's something you should hide or not discuss about. Menstruation is a natural phenomenon and it's nothing they should be ashamed of."

4. CONCLUSIONS

Empowerment of women in India has a specific goal, a gender specific goal. It has to eliminate "marginalization, devaluation, displacement and ultimate dispensability" of women in India. To achieve genuine empowerment, women

of India have to swim upstream so as to be able to defeat the traditional forces of logo centrism of the norm-based society. Since each one of them is a vital agent, they have to remember "all dyadic relations of a given type."⁴⁰

Thus, it is clear that though discrimination related with menstruation is gradually decreasing and women are practicing safe menstrual hygiene management in the urban areas, it still exists and a lot is needed to be done. Women are still disallowed from entering religious places or even the kitchen. They are not allowed to touch sacred or religious things. They are not allowed to touch pickle! Most of these discriminations, I feel amount to untouchability. However, it's good to know that women in urban areas are able to manage menstruation properly in an hygienic and safe manner which do not compromises with their health.

The most probable solution to end this menstruation related discrimination is educating people and spreading awareness amongst the masses that menstruation is a completely natural process and there is nothing "impure" about it. The State should also formulate policies that aim at spreading awareness through different mediums because such practices are in violation of the guarantees available to women under the Constitution of India. An anti-discriminatory law can also be brought which eliminates all forms of stigmas/taboo and discrimination women face.

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