



Menstrual concepts, hygiene practices and health seeking behaviour of adolescent girls in Bangladesh: A study on slum areas in Rajshahi

Most. Ummay Hani Kulsum¹

¹Dept. of Social Work, Bangamata Sheikh Fojilatunnesa Mujib Science and Technology University, Jamalpur

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*Corresponding Email:

ummayhaniru@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to explore the conceptions towards the menstruation cycle, hygiene practices during menstruation and the health seeking behaviour during menstrual problems of the adolescent girls from some selected slums in Rajshahi city who are primarily migrated from rural areas. In total, 30 in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted. The study findings reveal that adolescent girls have no idea about menarche before their menstruation that is why the majority of the adolescent girls get frightened during their menarche and become nervous about their situation. There are various misconceptions towards menstruation. Majority of the slum dwelling adolescent girls think that menstruation is a shameful issue. The study findings show that majority of the adolescent girls from slums face different types of health issues related to menstruation. Among those difficulties are lower abdominal pain, stress, anxiety, white discharge with bad smell, excessive white discharge, itching in the private part, iron deficiency, abdominal cramps, irregularity of menstruation, muscle spasms of leg, vomiting, nausea, headache, excessive bleeding, less bleeding during menstruation, lumbago etc. Due to insufficient awareness and poor financial condition of family they cannot take proper treatment which is very alarming for their reproductive health.

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Introduction

In Bangladesh, adolescent girl population is approximately 36 million, who face many challenges as they are physically, mentally and socially vulnerable (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2016). Adolescence is a very crucial time in every girl's life, because in this time there are different types of changes occurred in a human body, both in physical and mental in nature. Especially every adolescent girl faces an important situation in their teenage life known as

menstruation which is called menarche at the first experience of menstruation cycle. Menstruation is a very important issue of reproductive health in a girl's life. It is a natural process in a female's body. According to World Health Organization (1999), 10-19 years of age is considered as the adolescent period. Menstruation is one of the major natural causes of adolescent changing in a girl's life. Adolescent girls experience this menstruation cycle suddenly in their lives and for the changes in body created by it also creates

impacts on their mental health. In such a situation, they need more care and mental as well as nutritional support. But in reality, there is much ignorance towards the issue of menstruation in slum areas in Bangladesh. It also remains a forbidden topic for discussion, especially in front of male members of the family; in Bangladesh, menstruation is a hidden thing, a taboo. If anyone talks with a male about this issue, it creates a shameful situation for a girl. In many countries in the world, it is considered a female issue and a matter of infrequent talking (Mohite & Mohite, 2016). Menstrual hygiene practices and proper knowledge about this issue is very important for adolescent girls. In many cases it is noticed that majority of adolescent girls do not have any idea about menstruation before their first experience of menstruation (Hussain, 2020). In the slum areas in Bangladesh, menstrual issue is also a topic of secret discussion and there are many superstitions towards this. Slum denotes a high densely populated area within a narrow space in the city area and the population is very poor in this area, they are deprived from different types of facilities (Kamruzzaman & Hakim, 2016). This study has tried to explore the conceptions, hygiene practices and health seeking behaviour towards the menstruation cycle of adolescent girls in the slum area.

Objectives

- i. To explore the conceptions towards the menstruation cycle;
- ii. To assess the hygiene practices during the menstrual cycle;
- iii. To know the health seeking behaviour during menstrual problems of adolescent girls in the study area.

Methodology

The present study was based on primary data; in addition to this primary data, secondary data e.g., books, journals, public documents, website etc. were used. It adopted qualitative research approach. In-depth interviews and FGDs were undertaken to collect data in this research work. Thirty in-depth interviews and

two FGDs consisting 6 persons were undertaken for collecting data in this study.

Study area, population and sampling

Among the 12 city corporations in Bangladesh, Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC) was selected purposively as the study and from this city corporation two wards were selected. According to the Community Development Centers (CDCs) under RCC, there are 195 slums or poverty prone areas in the city and most of the slum dwellers migrated from the remote parts of the country. Among these areas, Bulonpur Sweeper Colony, Nahupara Bulonpur, Keshabpur Nadir Dhar areas under Ward No. 4 and Charsat Baia Purba, Charsat Baria Paschim under Ward No. 29 are selected as the study areas. The respondents were adolescent girls (married or unmarried) between the ages of 12 to 19.

Data collection and analysis

To collect necessary data semi-structure interview guidelines were prepared to achieve the research objectives. In the context of in-depth interviews and FGDs, interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the respondents and after that recordings were transcribed and translated into English. After translating the interviews, the data were coded, tabulated and thematically analyzed to explore the situation.

Findings of the study

Conception about menstruation and pre-menarche

The study findings show that adolescent girls in the slum areas did not have any idea about menstruation before their menarche. Their family members did not give any idea regarding this issue. The following excerpts clarify the situation: one of the interviewees of the study area said that, "I didn't know or I have no idea about menstruation cycle before my menarche." But it is important for every adolescent girl's guardian to inform of this issue, so that they can take necessary steps and be mentally prepared for it. Another respondent in this research opined that "If I knew about menstruation before starting my menstruation, then I could easily handle it.

Because when I first experienced it, I became afraid and couldn't understand with whom I can share this issue." Coherent to this study there is a previous study which demonstrate that majority of that study population, teenage girls, did not know about menarche before their own experiences, among them 57.8% were afraid and 49.1% were tensed to see their first menstrual blood and it affected their mental health (Onia et al., 2022).

In the study one interviewee mentioned that, "When I first saw blood in my dress, I felt scared and started weeping but I could not share this with anybody." Another one clarified that, "At first day of my menstruation I thought that from somewhere blood splattered my dress. After few moments I could understand that it was coming from my own body and became afraid but could not share it with my family members." Kaur et al. (2018: 1) revealed "In many parts of the country especially in rural areas girls are not prepared and aware about menstruation so they face many difficulties and challenges".

The study findings demonstrate that adolescent girls in the study area have various misconceptions towards menstruation. The following excerpts clarify the issue, one interviewee said that "Menstrual material is very sensitive because if anyone cuts it, she can do black magic by using this and it may result in infertility in a girl's life." Like this interviewee another one thought that, "If any snake or any beetle touch the menstrual materials, it causes various health risks which results in infertility in future, so I am very sincere about my rags to preserve it for further uses". A related study revealed that majority of respondents gave opinion if their menstrual materials come to the touch of any snake or eaten by snake, it may be the causes of their infertility (Coast et al., 2019). On the other hand, another one thought menstruation to be a shameful mater; she said that, "I think menstruation is a very shameful issue, my mother said that I can't share about menstruation because menstruation is only the subject of a female and it is a female issue." That means it should be hidden from the

male members in a family. Another interviewee demonstrated, "I don't take bath during this period, my mother prohibited me for taking bath because it hampers the menstruation cycle." But in reality, during menstrual period hygienic practices are vital for reproductive health. From the in-depth interviews one interviewee demonstrated following issue:

"During my menstruation time my grandmother does not allow me to cook and take some certain foods; e.g. pickle, cold water. Besides, I don't wash my hair with shampoo, because she told that if I do these it impedes the blood flow which is very harmful for my body."

One interviewee even thinks that "menstruation is a monthly disease of every female and it is a shameful issue for a female."

Menstrual hygiene practices

The study findings reveal that a significant number of adolescent girls in the study area are using Nekra (cotton cloth often used old one) during their menstruation. This is made by cutting old saree, orna or dress. The following excerpts clarify the issue: one of the interviewees in the study area said that "I use Nekra during menstruation. My family is very poor for this reason they can't afford sanitary napkin on a monthly basis. That's why I use this Nekra". Another study coherent to this study demonstrates that, in the slum area women use old cloths and they reuse it, which causes reproductive health hazard to the women (Afiaz & Biswas, 2021). Majority of the slum families in the study area are poor and they live from hand to mouth. So, using sanitary napkin is a luxury for the adolescent girls of these families. Another interviewee stated that, "I have heard that sanitary napkin is very hygienic during menstrual time, but it is very expensive. If its price were low my family could give me pads. In addition, menstruation occurs in every month, so that I think using pads is burden for my family." Majority of the respondents in the study area use old cloths as their menstrual materials. One of them clarify, "In the first menstrual cycle my mother gave me her old sarees' pieces

to use, from that time on, I use that Nekra as my menstruation material

This study reveals that majority of the adolescent girls in the study area clean their rags using only water rather than soap or detergent. One interviewee said that “maximum time I clean my menstruation rags by using only water, sometime I use soap or any detergent powder.” When they take soap into the toilet for washing rags male member in this slum make comments, which is embarrassing for them. Regarding this matter one informed, “I feel easy to wash my rags by using water rather than any detergent powder, because the washroom is common for other family members.”

The study also finds out that during menstrual cycle the adolescent girls face many difficulties to wash their rags. In the study area, i.e. the slum areas there are two common washrooms for eight families. The girls also face problem in changing rags due to lack of privacy; as they consider menstruation shameful situation for a girl's life and try to hide it from the male members. The following narratives clarify the issue: “I feel very shy to take rags to the wash room, when I go to wash these rags, I think other persons in the slum stare at my hand which is hidden in my dress.” Another interviewee clarifies that, “In the day time it is difficult to wash my rag; that's why I wash my rags very secretly and dry it in a hidden corner in our room, so that nobody can see this cloth.” Yet another interviewee said that, *“I change my rags when it gets fully wet at home; but at school, I can't change rags. In our school there is no private space to change rags or wash it. In addition to that I also feel discomfort to change rags in my home when others slum members are using the common toilets.”*

The study findings also show that the menstruation materials are buried or throw away (when it became torn to use long time) outside home after use. Majority of the respondents reuse the materials of menstruation. The following excerpts clarify the issue: “During the menstruation period I use old cloths and after using these cloths I keep it for reusing in the next time. I don't throw away these materials.” Adolescent girls in this slum reuse their rags until they tear,

then replace it with another piece of old cloth. One interviewee said that, “When the menstrual rags are torn apart, I throw them away outside my house, then I take another old cloth from my mother.” Here one's statement denotes menstrual disposal system is taken very seriously by the adolescent girls in the study area because there is a popular myth about the menstrual materials in the slum area. One interviewee in the study area denotes that, “I don't throw away the used rags, because it is very dangerous for health. Anyone can easily misuse these rags. That's why I bury these rags.”

The study findings also demonstrate that during menstruation school going adolescent girls confront some difficulties to change rags, and hesitate about blood stains on clothes being seen by others. A previous study conducted related to these findings revealed that, during the menstruation period missing school is a common practice among the adolescent girls and 41% girls in that study missed school during menstrual period (Alam, et al., 2017). In many schools there are no separate toilets or washroom for the girls to wash or change rags. The following section elucidates the situation: “During my menstruation times I hesitate to go to school because there is no private space to change and wash rags in our school.” Another one clarifies that, “In our school I can't change a rag that's why I do not go to school at the time of my menstruation.” Hesitation is a common issue in the adolescent girls during menstrual time. “During my menstruation time I feel hesitation in my classroom as well as school in fear of blood stains on my dress being seen by others.”

Health seeking behaviour during the menstruation related health problems

The findings of the study signify that majority of the slum dweller adolescent girls face different types of health problems related to menstruation; e.g., lower abdominal pain, abdominal cramps, irregularity of menstruation, muscle spasms in leg, vomiting, nausea, headache, excessive bleeding, les bleeding during menstruation, lumbago etc. The following narratives described

the situation: one interviewee described, “I have faced severe lower abdominal pain prior to start of the menstruation.” Another one said, “Every month I have mild headache during my menstruation time and excessive bleeding is a common problem at that time.” During menstrual period adolescent girls in the study area face more or less health difficulties. Another one clarified that, “My menstruation is irregular, after six or seven months it starts and there is very less bleeding which stay only two days.” Related to this study there are some research works that was reveals that, most of the respondents faced different types of menstrual health related difficulties as well as premenstrual syndrome. Among those respondents in that study 76% suffered from headache, 80% from lower abdominal pain and 62.5% suffered from fatigue (Sultana et al., 2021).

The study findings show that in the slum area majority of the adolescent girls who face menstrual health difficulties do not consult doctors due to their family’s poor financial condition. Some adolescent girls go to drugstores or homeopathic doctor for their menstrual problem. The following excerpts clarify the situation: “my menstruation is irregular but I do not go to any specialist doctor due to my father’s poor financial condition. I think it will be solved automatically by the grace of Allah.” In many cases adolescent girls ignore their menstrual problem. One respondent clarified, “in my menstruation problem I go to a homeopathy doctor near to our house and take medicine then I feel better and recover quickly.” One of the study respondents said that,

“My husband is very poor. That’s why I can’t receive any treatment of my menstruation problem. At the time of menstruation excessive bleeding and severe lower abdominal pain is a common picture. Because of my menstruation problem I can’t conceive, I’m very scared about this issue.”

One interviewee in the study area manages her menstrual health problem by using medicine. She claimed “when I face any menstrual health problem my father buys medicine from pharmacy and it gives me relief from problem.”

It is also demonstrated in the study that

some adolescent girls who face various health problems related to menstruation have apathy towards taking treatment. They do not take it seriously. Following narrative indicates the situations: “I have faced some difficulties; e.g. excessive bleeding, bleeding stay near about 10 to 15 days monthly during the menstruation time, but I do not care about it, I think that it will automatically heal.” Some of the respondents in the study area don’t panic about problems related to menstruation. “In the menstruation time it is normal to have abdominal pain, headache, leg cramps; and so, what? Female should have patience.”

Discussion

Menstruation and pre-menarche: conception and misconception

The study findings reveal that adolescent girls have no idea about menarche before their menstruation, that’s why majority of the adolescent girls get frightened during their menarche and became nervous about their situation. In another research related to this demonstrate that without any previous conception towards menarche around half of Bangladeshi girls face their menarche stage with fear and hesitation (Mehjabeen et al., 2022). It is very important to inform adolescent girls about menarche before their practical experience about it, so that they can easily accept the menstruation situation and handle it very carefully without any hesitation or nervousness. If they are made aware about menarche, the adolescent girls will feel comfortable which will support their mental condition. In another study it is revealed that more than one third (44.8%) of the respondents in that study had no concept or preparation towards menarche (Aniebue & Patricia Nonyelum Aniebue, 2009).

The findings of this study also demonstrate that during the first day of menstruation, i.e., menarche, the adolescent girls in the slum area became scared and couldn’t share this issue with other members of their family. At the time of menarche, the adolescent girls hide it from their mother and didn’t understand whatever they should do at that time.

There are various misconceptions towards menstruation. Majority of the slum dwelling adolescent girls think that menstruation is a shameful issue and it should be kept hidden from the male members of family. The mothers or grandmothers of the adolescent girls of the slum area advise not to disclose this issue to their father or brother. Another study related to this revealed that many respondents of that study opined that clothes used to manage menstruation should be kept out of sight of men and in the evening, girls are not allowed to go out during their menstruation time (Mondal et al., 2017). In the study area some adolescent girls are very conscious regarding their used rags, because they believe that by using these materials anybody can easily perform black magic and consequently be the cause of a girl's infertility. The study findings are also coherent with other study which revealed that, majority of that study area's women had misconception and superstition towards menstrual fluids that anyone can misuse this fluid by doing black magic, so they cleaned their rags at night when others were asleep (Sommer et al., 2013).

The findings of the study indicate that majority of the adolescent girls in the study area are prohibited by their mother to take bath during the menstruation cycle. Some adolescent girls of the slum area are not allowed to cook, shampoo their hair, eating some food; e.g. pickle, sour types of food- as their family believe that those things impede the flow of bleeding during menstruation. Related to this finding is another previous study and, in that study, it was showed that, during menstrual period girls have some food restriction, where they are prohibited from eating spicy and non-vegetarian foods; because it was considered that these foods may hamper the flow of bleeding (Tiwari et al., 2006). The findings of this study also demonstrate that majority of the adolescent girls in the slum area, think that menstruation is a monthly disease of every female and it is only the concern of a female rather than the male.

Hygiene practices during menstruation

The study findings show that the adolescent girls use old cotton clothes cut from cotton sarees or dress. After using these clothes, they preserve it to reuse in the next menstruation period. When these menstruation materials are torn apart, they throw these away; otherwise, they continue to use and reuse these old clothes. In the slum area majority of the slum dwelling adolescent girls' family are very poor, that's why they can't afford the sanitary napkin. Sanitary napkin is very costly for these families to afford. Many of them are of opinion that if the price of the sanitary napkin is affordable for the family, they can use it. Another relevant study demonstrates that 89.5% girls were using old cloths as a menstrual material and they also reused it the next time (Prajapati et al., 2015).

In the findings of the study, it is demonstrated that the majority of the adolescent girls wash their rags using only water rather than soap or any detergent powder. Some girls use soap to clean their menstruation materials. In another study coherent to this it is shown that majority of the slum dwelling adolescent girls face difficulties to clean their menstrual materials due to lack of private place (Hussain, 2020).

The study findings indicate that the rags are dried in the room or in the private corner in their house so that none can see the rags. As they think it a shameful issue. They can't give these under the sunlight due to the male members of family. This is very unhygienic for reproductive health. So, education about menstruation is important. Another research works coherent to this demonstrate that adolescent girls should be educated towards the issue of menstruation and its hygiene management after that they can change their menstrual practices (Devi & Ramaiah, 1994).

The findings are also coherent with another study which was qualitative research which conducted 46 in-depth interviews, 11 FGDs and KII. In this research, it was revealed that some respondents were not allowed to cook or go to school during the menstrual period (Kambala et al., 2020). Some respondents said that as sanitary napkins were very expensive, they use sanitary

pads for the first two days when the blood secretion is high and after two days of menstruation, they use old cloths as menstrual material.

The study findings show that majority of the adolescent girls change their rags after those get fully wet when they are at home but outside of the home in cases of working or during school time, they can't change their rags timely, due to lack of private places of changing. Outside home, they feel discomfort with wetness of rags but they have nothing to do about it. Sometimes they face difficulties in their homes too due to privacy issues in the slum area. In the study area there are limited toilets and washrooms for a huge number of slum members.

Health seeking behaviour in context of menstruation related health problems

The study findings show that majority of the slum dwelling adolescent girls face different types of health difficulties related to menstruation. Among those difficulties there are- lower abdominal pain, stress, anxiety, white discharge with bad smell, excessive white discharge, itching in the private part, iron deficiency, abdominal cramps, irregularity of menstruation, muscle spasms of leg, vomiting, nausea, headache, excessive bleeding, les bleeding during menstruation, lumbago etc. Due to financial condition of family, they cannot take proper treatment which is very alarming for their reproductive health. Lower abdominal pain and muscle spasms are the common problems of the adolescent girls living in slums during their menstruation. Majority of the respondents feel that they should take proper treatment but their family can't afford economic support.

The findings also indicate that problems of menstruation can affect the mental side. In the slum area the girls who have experiences about irregular menstruation and other health problems related to menstruation, face many mental problems. The study findings also show that the guardians of the adolescent girls living in slums are very apathetic towards their daughters' as well as wives' treatment. They take these health problems as a natural part of menstruation.

Maximum slum's families cannot afford

treatment due to poor financial condition. Like this study another related study revealed that when the adolescent girls became very sick during their menstrual health related problems, they took them to the medical center but at the early stage they were not allowed to go to seek for treatment because the ignorance of their family members (Bhattarai et al., 2020).

Conclusion and policy recommendations

Respondents in this study have no clear idea about menstruation as well as majority of them have various misconception about menstruation cycle which is very alarming for their reproductive health. In this study, adolescent girls in the study area use and reuse the old cloths as menstrual material. The findings of this study demonstrate that the slums' adolescent girls' families are unable to afford sanitary napkin which is very important for their menstrual hygiene management. In addition to that the adolescent girls face different types of challenges during their menstrual period; e.g. washing the materials, opportunity of menstrual materials changing time both at home and in school in the context of school going girls, lack of private places. Many of them face different types of physical health problems related to menstruation; e.g. lower abdominal pain, stress, anxiety, white discharge with bad smell, excessive white discharge, itching in the private part, iron deficiency, abdominal cramps, irregularity of menstruation, muscle spasms of leg, vomiting, nausea, headache, excessive bleeding, les bleeding during menstruation, lumbago etc. Due to poor economic condition and unwillingness, they cannot take proper treatment. So, it is important for the government and policy makers, social workers, NGOs workers to take necessary initiatives for the slum adolescent girls. If sanitary napkin's price becomes affordable, they can easily use these hygienic products and this will be useful for their reproductive health. Thus, it should be taken in the priority list for the betterment of the slum girls' reproductive health.

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