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SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPACT OF MENSTRUAL IN NEPAL

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ABSTRACT

Local politicians and political parties can play a vital role in creating awareness at the local level about the harms of this custom. However, politicians are often reluctant to highlight this issue because they fear of losing the support of common people. Parliamentarians rarely raise such issues in the national parliament; instead they want to conceal such social issues. Some non-governmental organizations at the local level and some government agencies are creating awareness, asking people to shun menstrual but due to the lack of support and backing from politicians, their campaigns have not been effective. There is a strong belief among locals that if women are allowed to stay inside the home during their menstrual period it would bring misfortunes for members of family. Similarly, there is a strong belief that family members will fall sick if the women stay inside the house. Male members of the family believe the custom must be followed to avoid any bad luck. Senior members of families and village elders are firm in this tradition, while the young, educated generation cannot gather the courage to challenge this custom.

Key Words: Challenge, Discrimination, Residential, Widespread,

Introduction

Hindu society of Assam, India originally initiated the following of lower status for women and they placed their authority at the center of the domestic area with the expectation of not being able to move. During the menstruation period, women and girls are considered to be polluted and pushed into inferior position. This situation creates gender discrimination in the society. The patriarchal capitalist society emphasizes the menstrual discrimination against women in the society and assumes that women should be hiding during their period. In Hindu religion, it is believed that menstruation is a Dosh that is brought upon by menstruating girls and women in the family. Therefore, menstruating girls or women are segregated from the family in order to get rid of Dosh that eventually leads towards cultural practices (Nicole, 2010 : 1-2). According to Hindu Religion, women and girls are considered as the same situation as so-called Dalit Caste (untouchable) during their menstruation period. In Nepalese context, among four groups, the last fourth group considered untouchable caste and they are not allowed to enter the house of other three groups. Besides, so-called upper caste all three groups reject any food from Dalit's house.

Statement of the Problem

This research will focus on to find out answer of these questions.

- a. How does the 'Menstrual Discrimination' effect on Nepalese society and what are problems being faced by women and girls during the menstruation?

Objective of the Study

The specific objectives are as follows:

- a. To identify the Menstrual Discrimination' effect on Nepalese society and what are problems being faced by women and girls during the menstrual period.

Methodology

The study should be based on qualitative research for finding out the perception, attitude and practices towards menstruation of community people those are followed as a custom in the society. And also focus to find out the difficulties faced by women and girls as a qualitative way. This paper based on descriptive and explanatory method of research design for finding how menstrual discrimination affects women and girls in their life and describe the beliefs and attitude towards the menstruation according to socio-cultural and religious perspectives.

Gender

There are different kinds of gender-based violence existing in Nepal including domestic violence, physical violence, sexual violence and social and cultural violence (UNFPA, 2013 : 6). Isolating women during their menstrual cycle for 4-5 days and during the postnatal period for 11days called 'Menstrual Discrimination' is one of the widespread cultural violence against women and girls in Nepal (Joshi, 2015: 23). There are different kinds of menstrual discrimination practices in Nepal. The main discrimination practices are as follows: (1) restriction to stay in residential house, (2) restriction to eat nutrition food and to take daily bath, (3) restriction to enter kitchen and touch things, (4) restriction to participation social gathering and religious functions and (5) forced to do heavy outdoor work during the menstruation period. These situations of menstrual discrimination practices and people's understanding and perception of Chhaupadi practices are discussed in detail below the chart. Out of total respondents, 42% of women and girls lived in the hut, 23% in the separate room in their house, 19% in own room and 16% in cowshed (Chart 1) place where they lived during their menstruation period. Below data shows that about 50% women and girls stayed in the hut during their menstruation period.

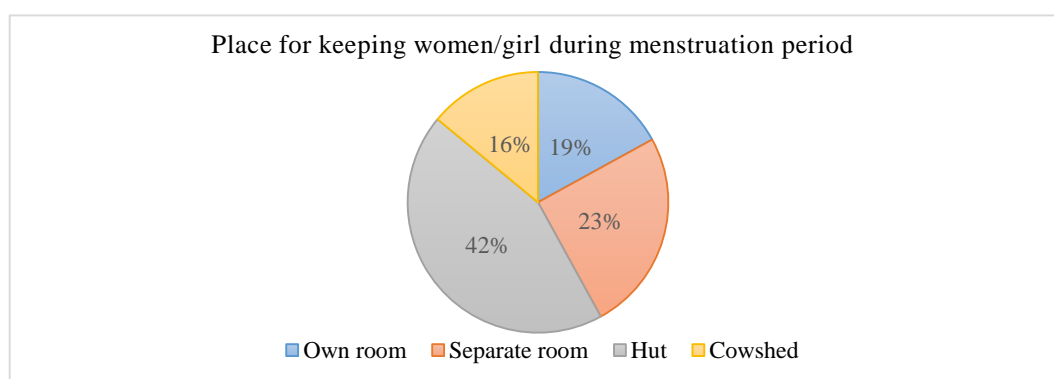


Chart 1: Place for keeping women/ girls during menstruation period

ChhaupadiPratha (Menstrual Discrimination) is a serious problem of gender-based violence (Tuladar, 2012 : 9). It promotes various forms of violence against women and girls, such as physical violence, psychological and mental torture (UNRHCO, 2011 : 2). That also causes obstacles to women's empowerment by reducing the confidence and capacity of women in social, political and economic activities. In this practice, girls and women are restricted to mobility on their will and faced by a lot of

mental stress to them (Action Works Nepal, 2012 : 3). Violence against women is a barrier to women's empowerment. Violence against women refers to any action of violence targeted at women considering the fact that women are considered as inferior persons in the society. Because of the violence, women suffer from physical, sexual and psychological including threats of such acts, arbitrary, deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or in private life (UNHCR and UNDP, 2013). UNICEF Nepal, nearly 3.2 million adolescent girls were identified as the most vulnerable and marginalized group of children in Nepal. It found out that, about two-thirds are living in poverty, troubled by gender discrimination and inequality, subject to multiple forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation, such as child labor, child marriage, and other harmful practices. The full potential of these girls and their contribution to their communities and country have yet to be realized (Misaki, 2012 : 1). Violence against women has been fundamental and unseen issues in Nepal because it is considered as a natural part of culture. Culture appears to assist as a tool to legitimize violence against women in Nepal. However, there are many changes in the past few years; the patriarchal thinking still exists in the Nepalese society that makes women victims of violence in different forms (Subedi, 2015 : 1). ChhaupadiPratha is one of the cultural violence against women and girls where they are not treated as normal human beings during their menstruation period, which is an abuse of their fundamental human right and the obstacle of women empowerment. Nepal has also signed to different international human right conventions including ICCPR, ICESCR, CRC and CEDAW (UNHCR and UNDP, 2013). To accomplish its obligations as the prime duty bearer the government of Nepal has endorsed various acts including Children Act 1992 and act to modify some Nepal act for maintaining Gender equality. However, women are still struggling to exercise their basic human right and fundamental freedom due to the traditional Chhaupadi practices and other harmful practices. Due to these practices, women have been subjective to become the specific form of discrimination and social exclusion (UNHCR and UNDP, 2013).

Patriarchy

Hindu society of Assam, India originally initiated the following of lower status for women and they placed their authority at the center of the domestic area with the expectation of not being able to move. During the menstruation period, women and girls are considered to be polluted and pushed into inferior position. This situation creates gender discrimination in the society (Das 2008:39). The patriarchal capitalist society emphasizes the menstrual discrimination against women in the society and assumes that women should be hiding during their period. The menstruation bound is an issue of gender inequality where women used to be excluded from education during the period (Bailey, 1993 : 121). Women's menstruation, which is a normal biological process, is locked through a variety of restrictions by controlling their bodies and limiting the scope of their engagement in the community. Male dominating society attempts to bind the women's mind by controlling their bodies. Furthermore, bounded mind and controlled body have restricted for getting knowledge about the natural process of menstruation (Drakshayani and Venkata, 1994 : 193). The patriarchal thinking of the Nepalese society considered that women are inferior position to men. Drakshayani and Venkata (1994) concluded that due to patriarchal Hindu values, even high caste's women are subordinated to their husbands, and treated as impure or polluted in their husband's home. While in their maternal home, they are treated as pure or sacred or the mythic form of Goddess. In their respective relationships women have to be obedient, and dutiful to their in- laws and family elders. menstrual taboos, and strict kitchen purity. Different behaviors and practices in different homes have the core of the myth that considers as pure and procreation as impure. In addition, they have concerns to control women's sexuality (Drakshayani and Venkata, 1994 : 193). The low status of women is caused by the patriarchal Hindu culture (ADB, 2010 : 16). Other traditional Hindu texts and deeply rooted patriarchal Hindu values also cause the hierarchy and power differentials of women and men. In the patriarchal society, the parents prefer having sons over the daughter that has been origins of discrimination against women and girls at home which consequently extends to the society and later on is established as a norm (Subedi, 2015).

Poverty

Majorities of women and girls are not allowed to stay inside the residential house and have to live in a shed during their menstruation period (OPMCM, 2012 : 42). Because of the lack of enough rooms in their homes, they cannot provide separate room to women and girls during their menstruation period, which is linked with the poverty (Amgain, 2011 : 20). In the case of the poor and socially depressed, economic deprivation further limits their options. This factor generates gender inequality and the subordination of women on the name of culture and religion in various communities (Subedi, 2015). Moreover, due to the poverty, most of the families and communities are facing of food deficiency in mountain and hilly area of mid and far western development region of Nepal (Kafle, 2012). women have to suffer more than men do; they are deprived of eating sufficient nutritious food during their menstruation period (Action Works Nepal, 2012 : 13). Most of the male members have to go to India to meet their twelve months needs for food needs and clothes. In addition, most of the families have no more choices and options. Many factors have allowed the Chhaupadi Practice to continue especially in mid and far western development of Nepal. These are as follow:

Table 1: Economic status-wise discriminatory form

	Percent of women who experience Chhaupadi						
	Forms of Chhaupadi						
Economic status	Stay in Chhaupadi hut	Stay in animal shed	Eat different food	Absent from school/work	Stay in different room of home	Bathe in separate place	Avoid social gathering
Poorest	9.9	10.9	6.1	2.7	37.2	18.9	62.4
Second	2.4	2.3	2.6	3.0	24.6	10.2	56.8
Middle	1.7	1.1	2.2	2.3	20.7	8.4	60.2
Fourth	1.1	0.5	2.1	2.4	20.7	5.8	57.3
Richest	0.6	0.2	1.5	1.6	23.8	2.9	52.5

Source: CBS 2015:150

The above table mentions the category of the economic status of women and different discriminatory forms of Chhaupadi Practice. Here, poorer persons rather than rich households practice different types of menstruation discriminatory forms against women and girls. They do not have access to the bundle of commodities and capabilities. Within the household economy, men are the controllers and women are the followers. Men have owned the resources whereas women do not have ownership to their resources. Men are the organizers and distributors of household resources. Men have inherited the parental property and women do not have the property rights until now which is one of the causes to carry on the ChhaupadiPratha (Amgain, 2011 : 21). Illiteracy, disease, and poverty are hindering the progress of overall men and women. Food restrictions and superstitions associated with Chhaupadi systems are also parts of overall deprivation and incapability to women. Inability to provide clean and separate room within the house for menstrual women is very much associated with the household structure and poverty.

Religious belief

Due to the discriminatory social norms, values, and rules, the human beings are bound in a limited area and they suffer physically, psychologically and mentally. Menstrual discriminatory behavior appears according to development level of society such as the cultural heritage, the socio-economic structure of society and education level of menstruating women and her family member and member of society as well. Many Social and cultural beliefs reflect a gender bias and discriminatory

attitude by considering menstrual blood is polluted and impure (Joshi, 2015 : 32). These socially and culturally driven gender bias and discriminatory practices impact on health status of women and poor socio-economic development of society and country. These religious and cultural practices affect women and girls health because of lack of proper foods and the poor hygienic environment in the hut when they need the nutritious diet, medicine, and good sanitation. During the menstruation period, many physical problems are encountered by women and girls, such as abdominal pain, backache, pain in the legs, headache and over bleeding, which need medical attention. Accessing medical facility in the hut could be difficult (Kothari, 2010). Chhaupadi practice has been widely recognized as a social norm in some community of Hindu society in Nepal through the religious rituals. According to Hindu religious ritual, women are considered as “impure” or “polluted” during their menstrual period that is known to have initially created by our ancestor. They believed that Gods and Goddesses become angry if any menstruating woman stayed in her residential home during that time because of her impure bleeding. Nevertheless, there are no any written documents in the Hindu teaching about the relationship between the bleeding and impurity. However, girls and women are considered as untouchable and impure by Hindu society during menstruation period. If women violated this practice, she will be blamed for the cause of any negative consequences in their family and society such as sickness, accident, and death. Tuladar (2012) mentioned that religious belief is a cause of menstruation in Hinduism. “Hindu religion has categorized all human beings into 4 hierarchical caste groups with specific schemata (script) for each group those are Brahmin, Chhettri, Vaishya and Shudra. In addition, “the social norms derived from the impurity of women and girls during menstruation and after delivery was identified as cross-cutting barriers and bottlenecks for governmental and non-governmental many program areas such as continuing education, menstruation hygiene, post-natal care, maternal and child nutrition. Women’s untouchable status leads to social systematic exclusion” (Misaki. 2012:2). Bhartiya argues that the perception towards menstruation is different according to the religion and society. Girls feel hesitation, shame, and embarrassment for getting knowledge towards menstruation due to the socialization of their society and religion (Bhartiya, 2013:527).

In Hindu religion, it is believed that menstruation is a Dosha that is brought upon by menstruating girls and women in the family. Therefore, menstruating girls or women are segregated from the family in order to get rid of Dosha that eventually leads towards cultural practices (Nicole, 2010:1-2). According to Hindu Religion, women and girls are considered as the same situation as so-called Dalit Caste (untouchable) during their menstruation period. In Nepalese context, among four groups, the last fourth group considered untouchable caste and they are not allowed to enter the house of other three groups. Besides, so-called upper caste all three groups reject any food from Dalit’s house.

Conclusion

The philosophical debates on issues like this involve strong societal sentiments and beliefs are bound to divide people based on what they think is of prime concern, the attempt to belong to the community norm in the belief that individual freedom is less important an issue as compared to what the community deems necessary for the common good, or an attempt to raise voices of personal freedom and be able to reject the community beliefs that do not necessarily address issues of individual interest. This article focused on general discussions in far-western Karnali states of Nepal, which involves isolation of women during menstruation, the ethical debates surrounding this practice and its public health significance. But it is not hard to see from a public health point of view that the practice has negatively affected health and well-being of many young girls and women. In spite of being declared illegal by the legal justice system, the practice continues to exist due to illiteracy, ignorance, traditional belief system, gender disparity, and power difference. The only way to abolish this practice is through mass awareness and education at the local community level. That calls for a prolonged multi-sectorial involvement of the government as well as national and international non-governmental organizations (which is existent even at present) in areas of education, health, women empowerment

and livelihood to increase the ongoing social awareness among affected Nepali communities about the natural character of menstruating and the harmful practice of Chhaupadi. This also requires a lot of patience with the recognition that age-old practices cannot be avoided easily. Recently, there has been reduction in the discriminatory forms because of the government's efforts in the high affected area. However, it is still being practicing in the rural community of far western and Karnali provinces. From the survey, I found that 85% of the women and girls are still practicing Chhaupadi Practice in different discriminatory forms in the study area. Therefore, government's effort has not been successful to reduce it yet. It is needed to increase government's effort by addressing direct law, the policy with sufficient program and budget as one door policy in the highly affected area specifically is in the Karnali and far-western states of Nepal. It's a kind of a cultural practice that violates the rights of women and girls.

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