

Effect of Menstrual Restriction on Health, Education, and Empowerment of Women: A Review of Literature

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ABSTRACT

A menstrual restriction is a form of social suffering which is also identified as a violation of the constitutional right globally. But menstrual restriction-related work is still a neglected area. This paper has adopted traditional types of reviews to conceptualize how the health, education, and empowerment of women have been affected by the menstrual restriction.

This study suggests, the menstrual-related restriction is not only a developing world issue but exists globally and has a high impact on a girl's health, education, and empowerment. Though, there is research on implementation and evaluation of the menstrual restriction is still needed to establish the evidence.

Keywords: Education, Effect, Empowerment, Health, Menstrual-Restriction, Menstruation

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INTRODUCTION

'Mense' is derived from the Latin word for a month and Mensis refers to the moon, Mense thus the menstrual cycle is considered as a reflection of the cosmic cycles of nature in the female body by Greek Philosopher Empedocles during 493-433 BC.¹ Menstruation is an important developmental milestone of girls on their life and is defined as one of the key biological difference between women and men which occurs in a cycle of 21-35 days long and begins two to six days of vaginal blood loss called period or flow that composed of uterine lining shed.² Menstruation starts around the age (11-15 years) which is the beginning of womanhood and is also an important sign of reproductive health, a way of preparing for pregnancy.

Even though everyone has accepted menstruation as a natural biological process, still there are widespread practices of menstrual taboos that exist globally. Though the comparison between countries, region, and religions are unknown. In this scenario, there are varieties of restrictions that are followed during menstruation around the world.

The menstrual restriction is the limitation during menstruation. Some of the practices around the world; fruits are not allowed to eat during menstruation in Bangladesh and- household chores and religious functions not allowed in Nepal.³⁻⁵ The menstrual related stigma of purity and pollution is deeply rooted in the Indian culture which also restricts women's freedom of movement.⁶ In some countries, menstrual girls are not allowed to go to school by assuming a school is a holy place.⁴ In Nepal, during menstruations, women are restricted to enter and touch their house so they live in a separate shelter called Chhaugoth or chhaupadi and also prohibited to touch male members, infants, pregnant women, holy people and restricted from sexual intercourse.^{7,8} Similarly women are kept in a separate hut at the edge of the village in Indonesia, keeping women apart around the house in some central plateau region of Mali.⁸

Women, who are aware of the restrictions also continue the practices to avoid a conflict because they fear religious and cultural beliefs, shame associated with menstruation. As a result of practicing restrictions, girls and women have suffered from different kinds of emotional, social, reproductive health problems at their personal and professional level.⁹⁻¹¹ Furthermore, restrictions during menstruation also play a key barrier for learning, education, and empowerment among girls and women.

In the present scenario, a menstrual restriction is still a form of social problem among girls and women which is interlinked as web up to the global network.^{10,11} Countries like Nepal and some parts of India have addressed it as a violation of constitutional rights^{6,12} but the menstrual restriction-related research work is still a neglected area.¹³ Hence, this review aims to explore how the health, education, and empowerment of women have been affected by the menstrual restriction.

METHODS

Today's world favours systematic review over traditional review because the advance of online publishing has made it easier to track and obtain articles than when we had to identify manually. But in this study, we have adopted a traditional narrative type review to conceptualize knowledge that contributes to a better understanding of the issues because there are limited research work done related to menstrual restriction globally.¹³ Also, this review work is vast, divergent, not purely descriptive, largely theoretical, and not systematic therefore appropriate for a traditional review.

The study reviewed the relevant literature regarding the impact of the menstrual-related restriction on health, education, and empowerment of women. The literature search was undertaken on the following electronic databases such as Google Scholar, HINARI (Health Inter-Network Access to Research), ACADEMIA, ResearchGate, websites of the Nepal government, a global menstrual network such as the society for menstrual cycle research, and other relevant studies on menstruation around the world. The study's findings are categorized from a textual analysis of the literature for the impact of the menstrual restriction on 1. Health, 2. Education and 3. Empowerment.

RESULT

We have developed a combination of three broad categories to present the reviewed issues namely: impact of the menstrual restriction on health, impact of the menstrual restriction on education, and impact of the menstrual restriction on empowerment.

Impact of Menstrual Restriction on Health

Menstruation, a natural biological process related restriction and superstitious belief exists in many countries around the world. However, the data are scarce. Even though half of the world population experiences menstruation, girls are not prepared

and occupied with many myths as it is not discussed openly in all cultures.¹⁴

A recent study by Amrita Mukherjee and team in 2020, found that 45.5% of the total participants (n=1342) saw menstruation as a bother or curse, 66.1% purify the kitchen, bed, bedsheets, or other household things on the fourth days and 72.1% were encouraged by their mothers to practice the restrictions.¹⁵ Now, it is not only the problem of the developing world, it is believed to exist globally. However, the data are scarce. For example, in the United States and Canada, adult and adolescent experience restrictions alongside global countries, although how these might compare is unknown.⁵

The menstrual restriction has several health impacts associated with it. A study conducted in 2014 in Nepal which assessed the chhaupadi practices and their effect reveals that women have experienced various forms of health problems like 40.6% extreme bleeding, 24% infection, 15.4% cold-related health problem, 35.4% mental health problem and 29% social health problems (includes 21.7% social neglect and 11.4% misbehaviour).¹⁶ Similarly, girls having unsafe menstrual practices are more than three times higher at risk of reproductive tract infections (RTIs) than girls who have safe menstrual practices.¹⁷ Also, girls have traumatic or shocking or fearful and negative experiences due to seclusion and not allowing to see father, brothers, and sun during menstruation.¹⁷ The menstruating women who stay in the hut are enforced to accept cold temperatures in winter and hot temperatures in summer which can cause life-threatening health problems like pneumonia, diarrhea, chest infection, suffocation, and RTI.

Some studies have found menstrual restriction has a strong connection with physiological damage of girls and women including external and internal infections and disabilities.^{17,18}

Impact of Menstrual Restriction on Education

Menstruation is seen as something private and secretive all over the world even in this 21st century. Though the extent to which the experience differs in different countries. Education is an integral avenue for economic opportunities and social movement as well as an indicator of social status.¹⁹ Many researchers have revealed that the menstrual practices heavily impacted acquiring quality education and restricting school attendance and completion by girls which is the main factor for poor learning among girls and women.^{18,19,20} One of the challenges to learn at school is

insufficient guidance to provide confident to girls during menses, their understanding of cultural issues and taboos related to mensuration.²¹

Menstrual restrictions have direct and indirect negative impacts on education in various ways, embarrassing learning conditions at school, home, and huts, fear of leaking, poor performance, and school dropout.²² Parents are denying sending their children to school during menstruation by assuming that the school is holy places and menstruation is a sin, and eventually, they fail in class also dropped out from school.^{17,20} A study among 5609 participants in Nepal, 12.1% reported school absenteeism due to menstrual shame, and 33.6% reduced their regular work.¹⁷

Girls are missing the classes at school for a few days because they are teased or harassed by the boys.²³ Also the menstrual restriction is recognized as a key barrier to the development of self-effectiveness and collective effectiveness among in-school and out-school adolescents girls.²⁴

Despite having lots of women's movements, activists and organizations remained silent which echoes with the women's coercion as well as menstruation as a matter of taboo. These restrictions during menstruation are factors for poor learning and education among girls and women. So, all the countries need to give interest at practice and policy level to improve this.

Impacts of Menstrual Restrictions on Empowerment of women

The existence of taboo is high in the least developed parts of the world where silence explains lack of access to services and education. As a result of which girls and women are further pushed towards economic loss and poverty.²⁵ Menstrual stigma and restrictions, not only hinder educational achievement but also hinder liberty and empowerment.²⁶

The menstrual restriction is one of the least discussed and most pervasive stigmas and the mask of silence which hindering the women from forward moving in their personal and professional careers. In this vein, menstrual girls feel less empower, shame, fear because of myths and misconceptions.¹⁸ This practice and concept of impurity impact universal education, gender equality, and women empowerment.²⁷ Menstrual taboo is one key contributing factor behind gender-based violence. Somehow, girls are missing the classes which is one reason for poor academic performances and low educational achievements

thus helping the gap in opportunities between men and women, worldwide.^{28,29}

The menstrual restriction is one form of discrimination against women that harm the physical integrity and human rights of women and girls. Discrimination, meaning they are silent, unable to participate in cultural, educational, social and income-generating activities which are leading them to a very serious problem in inadequate or low knowledge and information, dependant to their male partner, poor in decision making and lack of self-esteem. Breaking this discrimination is essential for women and girls to be able to reach their full potential.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This review provided insights into the effects of menstrual-related restrictions on girls and women and it made clear that this problem is not only the issue of the developing world. Menstruation and its practices are still concerned by taboos and restrictions.^{30,31} There are varieties of restriction following during menstruation around the world, such as

- Fruits are not allowed to eat in Bangladesh,
- Not allowed to do household chores and religious function in Nepal,
- Menstrual girls are not allowed to go to school in some countries,
- Restricted to enter and touch their house, prohibit to touch male members, infants, pregnant women, holy people and restricted for sexual intercourse.

Some of the researchers have highlighted that in the Christian Bible, there is a clear message to the impurity of women during their menstruation. In Uganda, menstruating girls and women are not allowed to drink their cow's milk. Among the Muslims, menstruating girls and women are forbidden to touch the Koran.³² In the US and some parts of Europe, some believe that menstruating women should not bake bread.³²

Various researches have demonstrated that people are aware of the restrictions during menstruation and still practicing without having a single and open discussion around menstruation. In some parts, dialogue on menstruation is highly prohibited. When it is public, it is seen as a burden of restriction and accepted as part of culture and religion without knowing the reason.³³ These restrictions are often making life difficult for women all over the world.

One among many other international agreements

on human rights, World Conference on Women's Rights, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has agreed that "Women and girls' human rights are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedom".³⁴ Since the menstrual restriction violates the rights of women, this practice is a case of direct violation of these laws and declaration.

This review was limited to exploratory design because limited studies exist that are specific to the topic of menstrual restriction. However, from what literature are available and from references made to the effect in health, education, and empowerment, the findings have clearly shown that menstrual-related restrictions have a direct impact on women's health, educational achievement, and hindering the women from forward-moving at their personal and professional careers, liberty, and empowerment. Further research to measure quantitatively the impact of menstrual restriction and evidence-based research is highly recommended.

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