



Gender And Menstrual Practices Among Women: A Study Of Thanjavur, India

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Abstract

Menstruation is a female-specific phenomenon. Although it had long-standing taboos and beliefs restricting women from levels of social and cultural development. Until now, the subject was considered taboo in Thanjavur. Menstrual taboos, which exist in many civilizations, influence girls' and women's emotional well-being, psychological health, lifestyle, and, most significantly, health. The absence of information and understanding about hormonal changes, menstruation, and sexual health among girls complicates efforts to eliminate social economic prohibitions and attitudes about menstruation. As a result, a determined plan for dealing with these challenges is essential. This paper analyzes the superstitions and beliefs on monthly periods, practicing in Thanjavur and how we can overcome this to make a better and more comfortable society for women.

Keywords: Menstruation, Puberty, Superstitions, Health knowledge, Thanjavur

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Introduction

Menstrual cycle is the normal flow of blood and mucosal tissue through the genitals first from the internal lining of the uterus. It is also referred to as a period and by other common names. The ups and downs in hormonal changes characterize the menstruation cycle. Between the first day of one period and the first day of the following, young women experience an average delay of 21 to 45 days (**Wikipedia**). Despite being a women's phenomenon, it has long been shrouded in mystery and superstition in many communities, including Thanjavur. Women and girls are excluded from several functions of culture and society due to menstrual restrictions. Some are advantageous, while others might be destructive

Historical background

Menstruation is not always regarded as a nasty and unclean biological function used by society to control women's liberty. According to historian **N. N. Bhattacharyya**, menstruation goddesses have been worshiped in many parts of India. Mother Earth (**'Dharti Ma'**) was said to

sleep' for a week each month in Punjab. After the 'navratri,' goddess shrines in various regions of the Deccan were closed until the Purnima (full moon day) while she relaxed and rejuvenated. Mother Earth was said to slumber through the scorching weather till the first sprinkle of rain fell in the Malabar area. Even today, traditions meant to honor the goddess' menstruation are celebrated during the monsoon season in Assam's Kamakhya temple and in portions of Odisha (**Chawla 1994**). The water demon episode is recounted in a historically prominent Sanskrit literature called the **Vashistha Dharmasutra**, which Chawla claims impacted the following statements on women's roles in society: "A woman is not independent; males are her rulers." According to the Veda, "a female who does not go nude or is momentarily filthy is in heaven," and "because menstrual discharge removes her sins month by month." During three days and nights, a woman in her courses is unclean.

Statement of the problem

There is no doubt that females are

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they all are participating politically, economically and socially in our society. Females are playing a very important role in developing the nation. In every field females are stamping their role in our country. But this paper addresses the dark side of our society that is filled with taboos, myths, cultural and social practices following only among them during their monthly menstruation even in this 21st century. This paper also tries to find out the root cause of this issue and solutions that can change this scenario.

Research objectives

1. To identify the factors responsible for these menstruation practices on women in Thanjavur.
2. To examine the impact and consequences on the health and well-being of women in the region.
3. To suggest some possible solutions to improve this scenario.

Review of literature

This study examines various authors' perspectives on menstrual cruelty practices that are common in Tamil Nadu and India. As explained above about many scholars of feminism, social-cultural anthropology, gender studies, most of them focused on scientific reasons, menstrual hygiene, customs, traditions and cultural aspects of this issue commonly in India. This leaves a big gap in the women's wellbeing, psychological health, lifestyle, gender inequality specifically in Thanjavur. To bridge that gap, this study examines the contributing factors and how they have directly impacted the Thanjavur women's wellbeing society.

Tamil Nadu urban sanitation support programme (TNUSSP) team (2019), in its article titled "Shame, superstition and secrecy hurting menstrual hygiene, finds Tamil Nadu study" viewed the girls in slums and rural near to Coimbatore were unhygienic and having taboos in using sanitary napkins even though the government of Tamilnadu providing free sanitary napkins. It's not a problem only in slums and rural areas, even females in urban areas were not that much aware about the using and disposal of sanitary pads. Meanwhile those myths are not only surrounding using

sanitary pads but also in disposing of those pads. So along with creating awareness on using sanitary pads, they should also focus on methods of disposing of it without any taboos and superstitions.

IlangovanGeetha (2019), argued in her well-known 40-minute short film titled "Maadhavidai" (Menstrual cycle) about using clothes for periods and reusing the same clothes again for next menstrual cycle without proper washing and drying, and all such stigmas could place women at risk for problems with their sexual organs, such as infections of the reproductive tract. Young girls who have just begun menstruating will pay attention to their parents or guardians. Girls are warned not even to hang these kinds of clothes outside to dry in the sunlight since men shouldn't notice those. "This is a problematic practice since moist garments can induce bacterial and fungal illness and have a higher likelihood of transmitting infection," she says. So, here we can understand where it's initiated. In the researcher's view, the young girls must be given proper menstrual hygiene guidance or advice by school itself. They can conduct compulsory awareness programs in schools for the female students who are studying (5th grade to 12th grade) with their parents. That should be headed by a gynecologist.

Gujarathi Jasmine (2014), stated in her work "Prevalence of menstrual related taboos in special context with Ayurvedic RajaswalaParicharya in young girls", that in this 21st century the families are now more likely to be nuclear families, where the female member in family became responsible for all the household works, career, children and other responsibilities. But even if it's a joint family, who is going to take responsibility for household works, children? Of Course females only. If one female in a family gets menstrual means another female will take the responsibility. Here the gender inequality begins. No matter of Joint or nuclear family. Females are the one who always put under the burden of these responsibilities. Why can't males take the responsibilities? Yes, there are countable men in this society, who don't have any hesitation and gender partial in taking the responsibility of each and everything in the family.



Puri S, Kapoor S (2006), gave some data in their famous journal "Taboos and myths associated with women's health among rural and urban adolescent girls in Punjab" shows there are, 41.5% of teenage girls in urban and 33.6% of teenage girls in rural were advised that entering the pooja room was prohibited. The age group and study area may have played a role in the discrepancy. But the same practices are followed in many parts of Tamil Nadu. In India there are many temples for goddesses. We all worship females and restrict female entry to pooja rooms & temples.

Garg S, Anand T (2015a), opined in their article named "Menstruation related myths in India. Strategies for combating it", that Perceptions of Hinduism in some parts of India are centered on purity and pollution. It is claimed that bodily excretions are contaminated, because once we keep making them. All Women, unconcerned of socio economic caste, Contribute to pollution through the biological processes of menstruation and delivery. Now it also reflects the religious views on natural processes. Not only Hinduism, most of the religions, which we all are following in India talks about purity as well as pollution. But there is no proper evidence that shows women's were impure and created pollution through menstruation and delivery. We humans only created many myths on women's menstruation in the name of culture and religion.

Bhattacharya N N (1980), stated in his famous book named "Indian puberty rites", that this dread of menstrual blood is equally prevalent in India. Throughout their menstrual cycles, Tamil women frequently isolate themselves and adhere to a set of restrictions that forbid them from doing things like intake of milk, milking cattle, touching light, sleeping on elevated beds, using common corridors, passing by blossom plants, and gazing at the stars. This was stated in the time period of 1980, but even after 42 years in South India especially in Thanjavur these unwritten rules are followed by women.

Wash matters, Wateraid organization (2017), stated in their famous journal named "Menstrual hygiene matters", that adolescent

girls frequently have poor knowledge of the menstrual cycle because their parents and teachers avoid talking about the subject with each other. Adult women may be unaware of biological reality or good sanitation practices, rather than trying to pass on social taboos and limitations that must be followed. Men and boys generally know somewhat less, but understanding menstrual hygiene is essential so they are able to encourage their partners, children, parents, students, and colleagues. Society wellbeing information and outreach may help achieve this objective. There will also be a need for us to raise menstrual understanding within and between both parents and school lecturers. Throughout this research, female empowerment across teaching in schools and enhanced decision-making authority can be very advantageous.

Garg S, Anand T (2015b), suggested in their famous work named "Menstruation related myths in India:

Strategies for combating it" that Government of India has approved a scheme to improve menstrual hygiene for 1.5 Crore adolescent girls by distributing low cost sanitary napkins in rural areas under the National Rural Health Mission since 2010. They also mentioned that the scheme is still in its early stages, and much more needs to be accomplished in this regard. In addition to this point, rural areas school students especially female students should get awareness about new schemes related to the welfare of women and society through teachers from primary class itself. It will definitely act as a seed in them and it will grow in the proper way in future.

Research Gap

The problem of gender and menstruation practices were addressed commonly in India also South India/ Tamil Nadu. But those practices are not the same with one another between the districts. No books, journals, articles or reports have been addressed or answered about this practice specifically in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu. This paper is to fill that gap and bring possible solutions to make a better society for women in Thanjavur.

Methodology

The research methodology primarily consists of the qualitative research method of



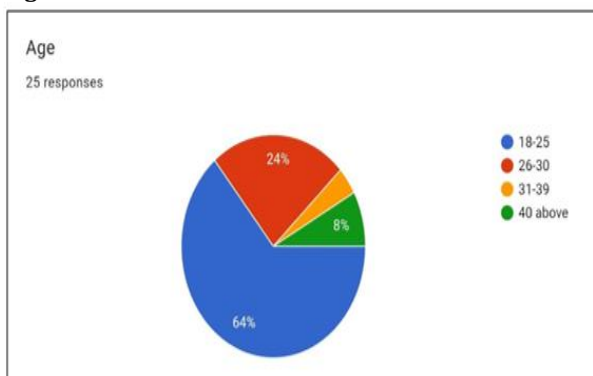
unstructured questionnaires. This paper also makes it through secondary information gathered from various scientific publications, past findings, documents, and publications. To write this paper, more than 5 research databases were examined, as well as non-probability questionnaires.

Data analysis

Men on menstruation and gender practices in Thanjavur

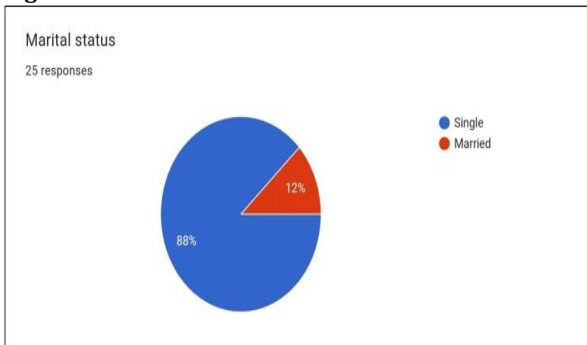
Questions were asked through online questionnaires form (google form) to the men who specially belonged to Thanjavur and nearby villages. The Researcher received only 25 responses from men. Majority of the men were not ready to talk or share anything regarding menstruation practices. This is such a sad part of the Thanjavur society from a researcher point of view.

Figure 1



From the above questionnaire summary (figure 1), 64% of them in age between 18-25, 24% of them in age between 26-30, 4% of them in age between 31-39, 8% of them in age of 40 above. Majority of the responses taken from the mens in the age between 18-25.

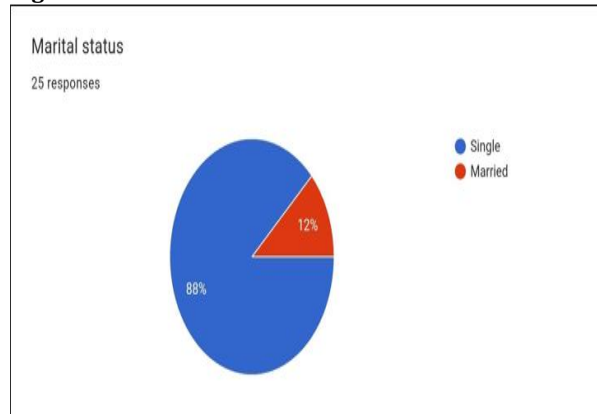
Figure 2



In 25 males, 88% of them were single and 12%

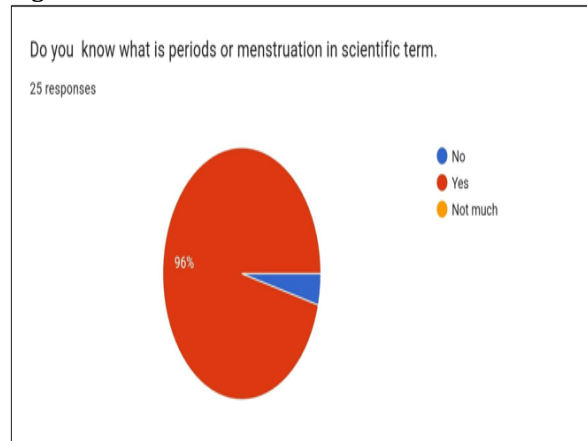
of them were married. This paper is not specifically focused on single men. In fact the questionnaire itself followed a Non-probability sampling method. But the participation of single males is higher than married.

Figure 3



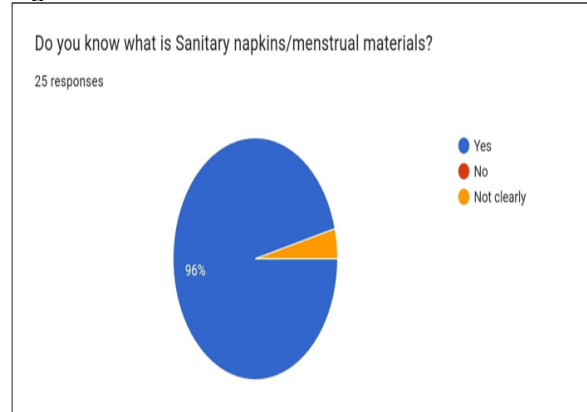
In 25 responses 60% men were working, 36% of them were students and 4% of them were unemployed but all 25 were literates.

Figure 4



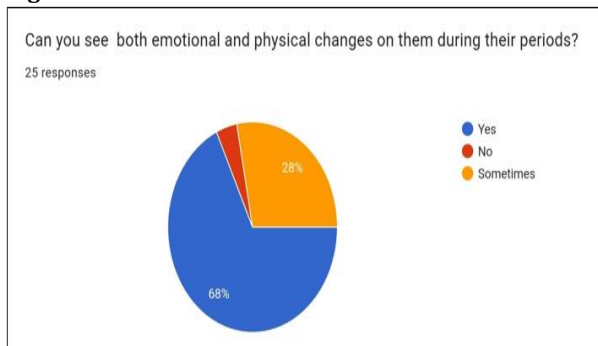
Above pie chart shows 96% of those literate males know about menstruation in scientific terms. And 4% of them are not clear about that.

Figure 5



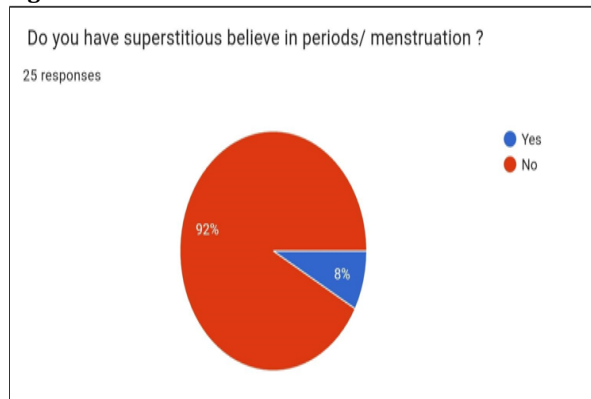
In those 25 mens, 96% of them are aware about sanitary napkins /menstrual materials and menstruation in scientific terms. Still Men participation is very less and unsatisfied.

Figure 6



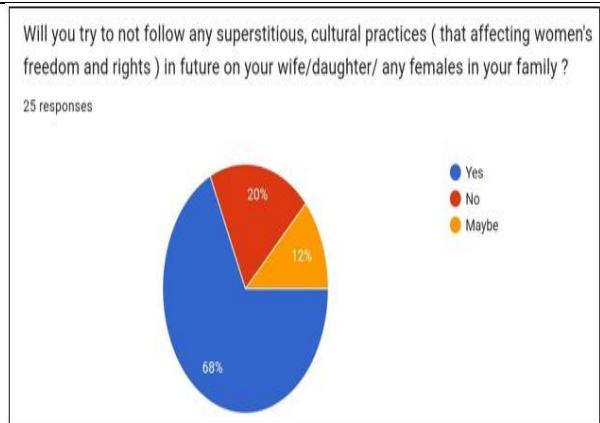
When we talk about understanding of physical and emotional changes in women during their period 68% mens can see those changes, 28% of them can see sometimes and 4% of them can't recognize it. It can be due to many reasons for not recognizing those changes but apart from recognizing, they should at least be aware about the emotional and physical changes and strug-gles.

Figure 7



Even though 92% of them don't have any superstitions or believe in menstruation, 8% of them still have superstitious beliefs on menstruation.

Figure 8



In 25 men's 68% of them responded as they will not follow those practices that affect women's freedom/rights in future, 20% of them responded as they will follow on upcoming female generations and 12% of them were not sure about whether they follow or not, so they responded as "maybe".

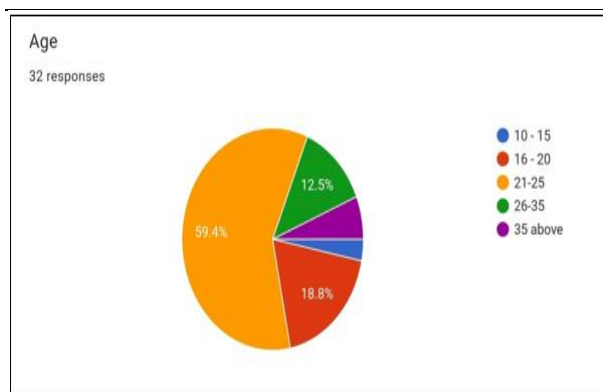
But most of the time men do follows these evil practices in many ways. For example; by not eating the food cooked by menstruating women, not respecting or recognizing their physical and emotional struggles and pains. On the otherhand, women were forced to do all the householdwork by their husbands even on their periods. Beside all the good scientific reasons for isolation /untouchability, men focus only on their own works and that should be done by their mother,sister, wife or daughter. But potraying as they never follow evil practices and discriminating them on periods. Of Course they are not following for their own needs and wants from the women. So, we can't come to the conclusion that men were not involving or participating in any evil menstruation and gender practices.

Women responses on questionnaire

Questions were asked through online questionnaires form (google form) to the women who specially belongto Thanjavur and nearby villages. The Researcher received only 32 responses from women.

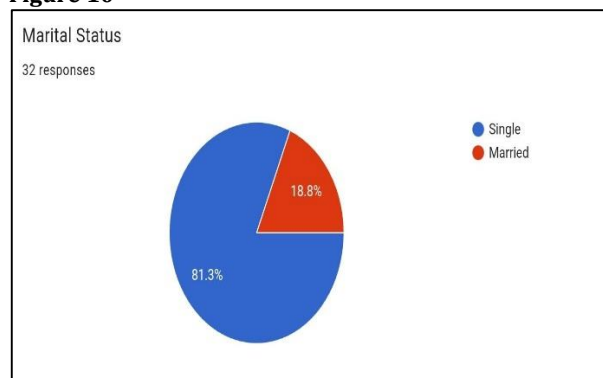
Figure 9





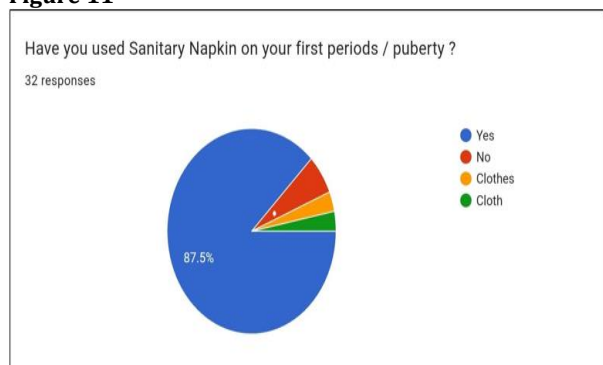
In those 32 womens 59.4% were in the age between 21-25, 18.8% were in the age between 16-20, 12.5% were in the age between 26-35, 6.8% were in the age of 35 above and only 2.5% of them were in the age between 10-15 (reached puberty).

Figure 10



In 32 womens 81.3% were single and 18.8% were married. Majority of them were Single women and most of them were students. All the 32 womens were literate.

Figure 11

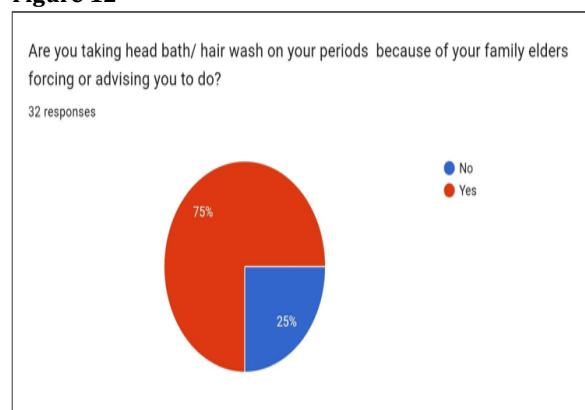


Fortunately 87.5% of them used sanitary napkins in their first periods/puberty. But 12.5% of them were not using sanitary napkins but used clothes. In detail those 12.5%

womens were not mainly in Thanjavur but nearby villages also (Vaduvur, Mannargudi, Edamelaiyuretc).

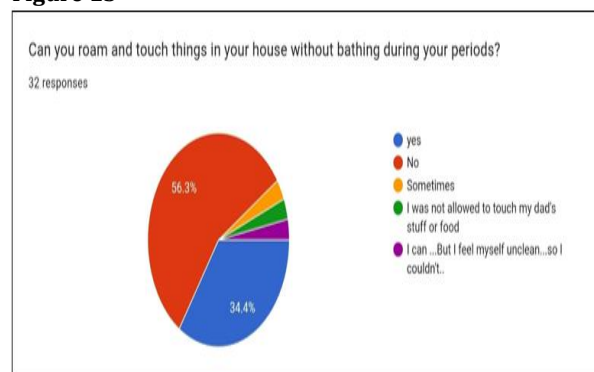
As the researcher already mentioned, the issue with those who used clothes in their puberty is mainly because of superstitions. They believe that using cotton cloth and burying that used cloth with blood stains is to prevent them from evil spirits. Menstrual blood is seen to be deadly, and sorcery ("vasiyam"/"seivinai") can be used by a wicked person to harm a woman or girl who is menstruating. It's furthermore believed that any woman can try to persuade her will on a man by using her menstrual blood. Surprisingly, similar ideas are still held across Tamil Nadu, particularly Thanjavur. But there doesn't seem to be a coherent or research based justification that appears to exist for that as well.

Figure 12



In 75% of womens were responded "YES". Elders, especially females in their family, were forcing them to do so and they are not allowed to touch even their own clothes before taking a head bath/hair wash.

Figure 13

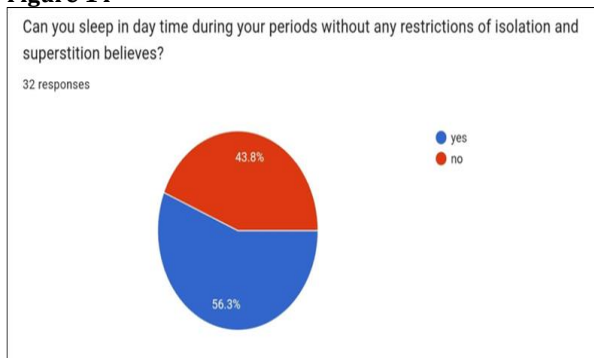


Majority of them (56.3%) responded "No",



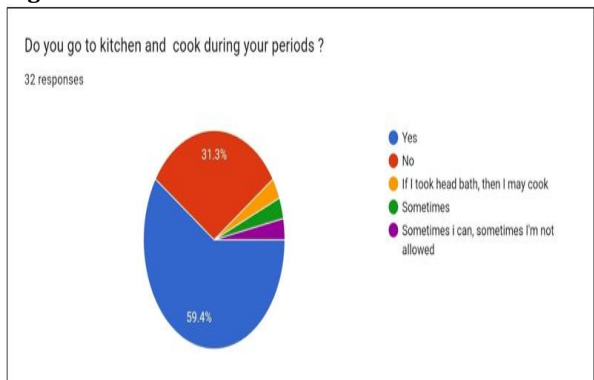
34.4% of them responded "Yes", with 9.8% of them having their own reason and explanation on this. But the majority of them don't touch anything in the home or anyone until they have been "purified" by a If they touch anything, that object or person will also need to be "purified". This myth here is rooted in traditional conceptions of sinfulness linked to menstruation.

Figure 14



In 32 women 43.8% of women were not allowed to sleep in day times during their periods. Even if they sleep, they have to isolate themselves until early morning or they have to take a head bath / hair wash again. Menstruating women are mostly assumed to be unhygienic and filthy. But the majority of them (56.3%) do not follow this uncommon practice.

Figure 15



From the above summary, 59.4% of them responded "Yes", 31.3% of them responded "No", but 9.8% of them gave their own reasons like "sometimes", "after the head bath", "not allowed to". Main reason behind not entering the kitchen and not cooking before taking a bath is the belief they have that the meals girls prepare or help to manage may be contaminated.

Figure 16

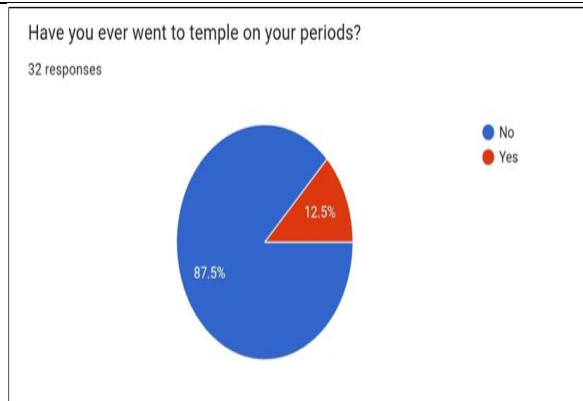


Figure 16 shows a maximum (87.5%) women never went to temple during their menstruation and 12.5% of them did not follow those restrictions. Even some educated people do not have the authority to decline some taboos or limits, especially when it comes to going to the temple. As a result of being excluded from some social activities, The prohibitions have a negative impact on progress, healthiness and happiness.

Findings and Results

In Thanjavur, women are subject to a lot of restrictions while they are menstruating. Numerous everyday domestic tasks that are regarded as "holy" or "sacred" are forbidden. One strongly held notion in Thanjavur is that a lady who is menstruating cannot participate in a religious ritual. The most often prohibited behavior was "entry to the temple," and both illiterates and literates share this notion. It demonstrates that menstruation still has social and religious stigmas that cannot be changed by literacy alone.

The location and age group included in the research might be to blame for the discrepancy. Similar results were found in a research carried out by **Singh A J**. When specific misunderstandings are taken into account, the current study indicated that womens were more likely to have them than mens, although overall there were not many differences. Menstruation is poorly understood. People consider it disgusting and unholy even though it is a typical indication of a infertile condition and a natural metabolic action, which may cause some psychological issues in adolescence. The physiology of menstruation has to be made more widely known, especially among women because they are more likely to have



misunderstandings about it.

Recommendations

The current study shows that being more educated does not increase one's awareness of menstruation. This is where literacy and education diverge. All adults need to be educated about menstruation in order to raise awareness among them, eliminate misunderstandings, and prevent unwarranted stigmatization of women who are menstrual. As opposed to men, women hold more preconceptions.

Not just children, but also adults, and particularly females, should get information on reproductive health. Even if teenage girls in villages seek to escape these beliefs, aged elders sometimes push their traditions on them without fully understanding them.

While some initiatives, like the **RashtriyaKishorSwasthyaKaryakram** adolescent health strategy, had already made progress in finding solutions by, for example, offering girls counseling and budget - friendly personal hygiene products and menses knowledge, most fall short in addressing the sociopath component of the issue, based on the Gates report. The report states that only a few initiatives specifically target the people who spread negative perception, including "society members and influencers in girls' lives, particularly her mother," who can have an immediate impact on her daughter's behavior as well as relatively long impacts on how she transitions into sexual maturity.

Conclusion

Women in various traditions around the society have validated a unique way of life during their regular menstruation. There are some aspects of menstruation practices that are universally shared even though each culture and religion has developed its own that seem to be important to its particular social and ethnic complexities. To mention a few, these include isolation, diet control, and staying away from divine practices. These cultures regard the spiritual factor as advantageous instead of antagonistic to the impurity factor. It is completely obvious that taboos surrounding menstruation have begun to be perceived as a danger to one's well being, and numerous people are likely to be welcoming to removing

the stigma attached to this problem. The researcher examined the perception of the menstrual cycle in cultures of Thanjavur and its surrounding villages, in our investigation of the beginnings and foundations of menstrual taboo. Patriarchy appears to be the real cause of almost each viewpoint. As a result, the source of the taboos appears to be the unequal treatment that females have experienced since ancient times. However, as these young women discover their voice in their own understandings of faith and menstrual cycles, education, both in schools and at home, is essential for having a larger and more widespread impact on society.

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