

# Changing Experience and Interpretation of Menarche by Generation

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## Abstract

This note seeks to bring to light women's subjective experience and interpretation of menarche by generation, links up the changes with changing socio-economic processes and argues that younger Nepali women have relatively concrete information on menstruation than their mothers and grandmothers.

**Keywords:** menarche, knowledge, messages, sources, women, intergenerational

## 1. Introduction

Menstruation- a central aspect of a woman's life-is a key dimension of gender. Menstruation signifies a woman's capacity to bear a child. The bearing capacity and role of women has remained central in human history. With menstruation, a girl begins an adult life and the construction of womanhood begins around her. As Dube (2001 : 101) notes, "In both North and South India, the onset of puberty is a definite point of departure in the life of a girl". The girl leaves her childhood behind and enters into womanhood. By entering into womanhood, she enters into permanent membership with other women (i.e. mother, grandmother, sister, etc.)". Menstruation also gives the girl the feeling that she is a normal woman who has the capacity to bear a child and, therefore, makes her eligible to marry. It often makes the girl and those around her feel normal and 'good'. It is another thing that with menstruation "she has reached the stage when her body is ready for reproduction but she has no authority to do so because with the onset of puberty, a girl's life is restricted in many ways. Her mobility is restricted and interactions with male members are curtailed" (Dube 2001:101). As Dube elaborates, post-pubertal women in many societies are left with only two goals in life--marriage and motherhood. A menstrual woman's image and role is constructed with a sexual script in such a way that she becomes ready to marry and become a mother. In this respect, Arole (1995: 38) notes that in South Asia coming to age is considered significant in a woman's life by the family and by women themselves. Menstruation is a challenge to women worldwide. The physiological aspect of challenge is universal. Cramps,

pain, heavy bleeding, long bleeding, and back pain are common problems of menstruating women. In many societies, in South Asian societies in particular, women's lives have become difficult because of social meaning attached to a variety of bio-physiological phenomena and processes. The widely prevalent notion of purity of pollution and the conceptualization of menstrual women as impure and polluting have also rendered women's lives difficult.

In South Asia, and in general, a woman in menstruation is often considered a pollutant (Arole 1995 : 38). The notion that menstruation is impure and that the menstrual woman is a pollutant, and thus dangerous, is nearly universal. Blood appears to be the object of a set of emotionally tinged ideas in all known human societies. It stands for death, murder, life-giving force or kinship. "Menstruation blood, with its mysterious periodicity, is considered especially terrifying and disturbing, to judge from what we know of primitive ritual" (Kessler 1976 : 72).

Ancient Hindu religious texts conceptualize menstruation as impure and menstrual woman as well impure and pollutant. Texts, therefore, prescribe religious and social codes that exclude women from engaging in important and prestigious social activities, e.g. religious rituals. Illustratively, menstruating women cannot read sacred texts. They cannot look at the sun. They cannot enjoy sex with their husbands. A Brahmin cannot engage in conversation with a woman in menstruation; should he make a mistake, he should be purified by taking a bath and sprinkling cow's urine (Jamison 1996 : 14). As the menstrual blood in Hindu ritual texts is considered highly polluting, a woman in menstruation becomes unfit for religious rituals temporarily. "If on the vow-taking day his wife is untouchable, having excluded her he should worship" (Jamison 1996:33). The words untouchable and exclusion are used to refer menstruation and associated exclusionary practices. Manusmriti, among others, set rule for pre-pubertal marriage, insisting on virginity as an essential prequalification for marriage and fidelity during marriage and after wedlock (Kapadia 1966 : xxiv). The coming of Parasara, a composer of sutras (rules of conduct), marks the intensification of regulation of pre-pubertal marriage. Parasara notes that a girl who completes 10 years of age is biologically ready to menstruate. He termed a woman of that age a rajasvala. If she becomes rajasvala—completes 10 years of age prior to her marriage, her parents and her older brother go to the hell. (Kapadia 1966 : 142). Due to such religious and social pressures, child marriage became the norm among the

higher-caste groups.

Nepal, although extremely diverse in terms of religion, caste, ethnicity and language, is still highly influenced by Hinduism-led religious ideology and practices. Hindu faith is professed by nearly 80 percent of the people, although there is considerable religious syncretism as well especially among Hindus, Buddhists and animists. In this context, rishi panchami, is taken as an annual ritual which purifies women in menstruation from sin (paap),(Shah, 1995)

**Empirical evidences on menstruation in Nepal:** There are limited studies on menstruation. Studies are primarily focused on education, health and hygienic aspects of menstruation (Water Aid Nepal 2009; Adhikari, et al. 2007; World Bank 2005; Oster and Thomson 2009). These studies have tried, in particular, to link women's access to education with the knowledge and practices of menstrual hygiene.

Studies have also been conducted on the knowledge of women regarding menstrual hygiene and application of such knowledge on their lives. One such survey research was conducted by a group of medical personals with 150 rural girls aged 13-15 from Chitwan district. The major objective of the study was to evaluate the knowledge and practices among rural girls of different aspects of hygiene during menstruation. In particular, the study tried to find out whether post menstrual girls knew about the anatomical and physiological processes of menstruation. The study (Adhikari et al. 2007:382-386) suggested that a majority of girls were not managing menstrual hygiene well. Another study claimed that because girls were treated like "untouchables" during their period, they were absent from schools (Water Aid Nepal 2009). Studies on menstruation have also been conducted on "cultural aspects", i.e., on the chhaupadi system—a system that keeps a menstrual woman away from home and confines them to a small menstrual hut during the period of pollution. A few researchers have attempted to throw light on women's subjective experience regarding menstruation (Bennett 1983, Acharya and Shrestha 2002, Karki 2002, Kondos 2004). Overall, social research on menstruation from the emic perspective has been rare. Therefore, the present work on menstruation is significant.

## 2. Physical location and method

The spatial location of this study is Nepal as a whole. It includes the Tarai and the Hills. It also includes the urban and the rural areas. Further, it

also includes the different caste groups, including the Dalits. Several women from the various ethnic groups have also been interviewed. It also includes various economic, income and occupational groups. It also includes various linguistic and regional groups.

**Table 1 Locations of Study and Interviewees across three Generations**

Location	Number of first-generation women (grandmother) interviewees	Number of second-generation women (daughter-in-law) interviewees	Number of third-generation women (granddaughter) interviewees	Total
Urban Kathmandu	5	5	5	15
Rural Kathmandu	8	8	8	24
Eastern Tarai	4	4	4	12
Western Hills	8	8	8	24
Total	25	25	25	75

Twenty percent of the women interviewed are from urban Kathmandu. Approximately thirty percent are from the rural areas of the Kathmandu Valley, which are increasingly acquiring an urban character. The rest of the women interviewed, i.e. approximately one-half are from rural areas (Table 1). The rural locations selected fall in Morang and Baglung districts.

**Table 2 Ethnic, Caste and Regional Affiliation of Interviewees**

Location	High Caste	Dalit	Ethnic	Total
Urban Kathmandu	9	NA	6	15
Rural Kathmandu	15	9	NA	24
Eastern Tarai	NA	3	9	12
Western Hills	12	6	6	24
Total	36	18	21	75

All in all, among the 75, there are 36 “high caste” women from the Hills. Of these women, nine are from urban Kathmandu, 15 from rural Kathmandu, and 12 from the Hills in the Western Region (Table 2). Hill Dalits account for 15 women, and there are three Tarai Dalit women. There are 12 women from ethnic groups in the Hills and nine “ethnic women” from the Tarai. Nine out of the 21 were from the Eastern Tarai, six from the Western Hills and six from Urban Kathmandu.

This is an ethnographic study. The study is a part of a longer study which was carried out in 2009 to explore changes in Nepali women’s lives during last 50 years period. Women were the primary interviewees. Besides,

male household heads, local leaders, teachers, and social workers are other sources of information. Women were selected from 25 purposively sampled households. Purposively sampled households consisted of three generations of women. The nature of household was patrilocal. In Nepal, rule of residence is predominantly patrilocal. Oral history interview was used to acquire information. Long conversation was the tool. Check lists were prepared. Interviews were tape-recorded. Collected information was thematically presented.

### 3. Discussion

#### Prior knowledge about menstruation

In fact, menstruation is all around growing girls and their mothers, sisters, older friends, women neighbors who speak about menstruation at a level of density that it would be impossible for the girls to be oblivious to it. It should be noted that the menstrual period is widely known as *nachhune*, which implies that a menstrual woman is prohibited from touching and from being touched by many significant others, e.g., adult men, as well as many significant objects.

Nearly all women, irrespective of age, had knowledge about menstruation prior to their own personal menstrual experience (see Table 1). A very few women, however, were deprived of prior knowledge on menstruation primarily because of their class position and cultural practices. Geeta Devi, 40, and her daughter Sarala, 18, fall in such a category. They are Dalit (Musahar) and from the Eastern Tarai. They also live in a precarious economic condition. They had no information about menstruation till they reached puberty. When Geeta Devi was in her first period at the age of 12, she thought she was injured by a hookworm; that was why there was blood in her leg. At that time, she was coming from wage work. She met a friend on the way and shared her story. She came to know from the friend that she had had her first menstruation.

**Table 3 Number of Women who had Prior Knowledge about Menstruation**

Response	First generation Grandmother	Second generation (Daughter-in-law)	Third generation (Granddaughter)
Yes	23	24	24
No	2	1	1
Total	25	25	25

Sarala, 18, who came of age at 14, also did not know about menstruation as her mother did. She became menstrual early in the morning. Her mother

and grandmother had left home for wage work. Poverty and culture play a key role in the experience and interpretation of menstruation. Questions of basic survival remained paramount over all other rules in life. Wage earning was the basic survival strategy of the family. They did not have their own home. They squatted in public land and had rudimentary houses. It was only very recently that they acquired citizenship certificates, which sometimes open access to several social services. They did not go to school either, which was, among others, a place to learn about menstruation through texts, teachers and friends. More importantly, menstruation and exclusion rules never become central to their lives. In many other matters the Musahar women were influenced by the cultural practices of the Tharu and Khawas who are dominant in this area. And Tharu and Khawas do not observe first and periodic menstrual rule that the high caste and several other groups do.

The source of information women utilized was varied across generations. The women I chose to spoke knew about menstruation directly or indirectly through a multiple of sources (see Table 4). Observing practices by mothers and older women in their neighborhoods, soaking information about menstruation from older women like mothers, grandmothers and other women relatives let them know a whole lot about menstruation. Information was also shared more or intensely within peer groups and older friends who had already gone through the process. The youngest generation, most importantly, had access to more sources of information on menstruation compared to the earlier two generations. Most in the youngest generation also acquired some information from textbooks and teachers. Mother, grandmother, school curricula and teachers and frequent discussion at home and in community about the day to start menstruation are the major sources of information before menstruation. Some girls and women had also received information from women they worked for, e.g., women who employed such girls and women as domestic workers. Gyanu, 15, a Khawas from the Tarai knew about menstruation long before she read such information in her book. Gyanu was a domestic help to a local high-caste family since her 7 years of age. The lady who employed her had instructed her time and again to excuse herself from work should she enter into her first menstruation. Besides, TV advertisement of sanitary pads has made urban young women aware about menstruation. Almost all women who are raised in families with the tradition of menstrual exclusion necessarily come to know about the social aspects of menstruation during

recurrent discussion and admonition at home.

**Table 4 Changing Sources of Socialization on Menstruation by Generation**

Sources of menstrual socialization for		
First generation (Grandmother)	Second generation (Daughter-in-law)	Third generation (Granddaughter)
Mother, grandmother	Mother, grandmother	Mother, grandmother
Relatives, neighbor	Relatives, neighbor	Relatives, neighbor
Observation	Observation	Observation
Frequent discussion at home	Frequent discussion at home	Frequent discussion at home
		Curricula, teacher, school friends, senior girls at school
		Television, youth clubs, booklets

Menstrual knowledge among most of the first and second generation women, however, was limited to the concept and practice of rules of purity, pollution and exclusion. They were much more informed about the social aspects of menstruation and had much less knowledge on the physiological aspects. A majority of them had been told that menstruation and menstrual woman are impure and dangerous to the members of the natal home in particular. They had been well schooled in the rules of exclusion. They had information about what to do and what not to do during menstruation in general and the first menstrual period in particular. They were strictly advised by mothers and grandmothers to exclude themselves from fathers and brothers in particular. They were also informed of certain dire consequences that would follow if they disobeyed the rules. Older women, including mothers and grandmothers, told them many stories of the families where women did not follow the rules. The consequences included loss of property and death of livestock, drought, human illness and even the death of male members of the family. Such misfortune was linked to the ire of the gods and, in particular, those of one's ancestors. Women in the earlier two generations, on the other hand, had very little knowledge about the bodily processes involved in menstruation. A majority of them did not even know that they would bleed when they menstruated for the first time. Nobody informed them that it was a physiological process; blood was too dirty or too profane or impure to think and speak about. Neither did they have an opportunity to know the physiology of

menstruation from text or other books or through school teachers. Bennett (1983) describes a similar experience of a woman in Narikot village where she conducted her study on high-caste women.

Some women in the first two generations were misled as well. One in the second generation shared her confusion this way: “My aunt told me that when I menstruate for the first time, there will be some terrible sound and a red mark would arise on my forehead. Nobody told me about the physiological process of bleeding. The thought of the first menstruation, therefore, was a nightmare to me.” The first flow of blood was a nightmare to a majority of women.

Women in the third generation had relatively much more concrete information about menstruation. They had information of both physiological and social aspects of menstruation. They had multiple sources of information as compared to the earlier generations of women.

A majority of young women are aware about the bodily process involved in menstruation. A majority of them, however, have a fairly limited knowledge about the physiological side of the menstruation. They knew that menstruation is not only a social phenomenon; it has a physiological basis as well. But many had only a bare level of information on this aspect. Minu, a 19-year girl from rural Kathmandu, said that she knew only a bit about the physiological aspect of menstruation from what she was told in her classroom. The teacher did not give clear and adequate information to the class. In her view, the teacher was a man and he was somewhat hesitant to teach the subject. Minu notes:

We have co-education in our school. The subject was taught by a man teacher. He did not go in detail about the subject. Boys also did not show interest in this topic. I wanted to know more primarily because I had not gone through the process yet. I had information about the social aspect of menstruation from women members of the family. But I had no information about the physiological aspects. Yet, I could not ask questions in the classroom because the subject was related to our sexuality.

Only a few of the youngest generation had adequate information about the physiological process of menstruation. They came to know about the process from school friends, senior girls at school and from the school texts. Besides, a few of them had acquired additional information about the physiological aspect of menstruation from mothers and aunts who were educated and employed as well.

Many young girls come to know about the physiological process of

menstruation cycle through school texts. However, the subject is taught only at Grade Seven with elaboration. Many of the girls have had their first menstrual experience by that time. As such, older school friends, who already had gone through the experience, are regarded as the earlier source of information. Priti, a 21-year old from Kathmandu notes,

I became menstrual at 11 when I was in Grade Six. By that time, three of my classmates had already undergone through the process. I learnt more from them. I learnt, particularly, the physiological aspects of menstruation from them. They demonstrated us how to use a pad when we were inside the school toilet. It was very helpful. Thought my mother had told me clearly about the bleeding process, she never taught me how to use a pad. My friend helped me to do it and it was very useful. It was because of this therefore I was not afraid of bleeding.

The advertizing world, too, has provided girls with some useful information. A young woman from Kathmandu said that she came to know a lot about menstruation and its management through TV commercials which advertised the sanitary pad.

Lila, a Magar girl from the Western Hills, noted that although she had not observed menstrual rules at home, she came to know of the rules from senior girls at her school. These girls used to ask junior girls to offer jal (sacred water) to a god, rather than offering it themselves, whenever they had periods. There was a temple on the way from the school back home. Similarly, she had also visited senior girls who were observing first menstrual exclusion. The young girl, therefore, had more information on the Brahmanic social aspects of menstruation than their mother and grandmother. They were also, because of schooling, relatively more familiar with the physiological aspects of menstruation as well.

A few young women, however, noted that they were clearly told by older women such as mother, aunt, woman teacher and friend about the process of menstruation. Anu, a 16-year-old girl from Kathmandu notes and laughs,

I knew the rules of exclusion long before I came to know about the physiological aspects of menstruation. I knew the rule of exclusion because I was the part of the family and society that gave importance to menstrual exclusion. But my introduction with biological aspects of menstruation came later. My aunt (phupu, father's sister), who is a teacher, clearly told me about the process. My mother, who works in an NGO, also gave me additional information. So I was clear and relatively relaxed. Still

the first flow of blood brought much sadness in me. But it was temporary. Anu could laugh at the experience now. Priti, a resident of Kathmandu, notes, “I was not afraid, but little bit awkward and abashed because I thought I was suddenly a grown-up person”.

The third generation reports that school texts rank at the top in providing accurate information related to physiological processes during menstruation. Educated and informed mothers and women relatives occupied the second position in this regard. A survey entitled “The impact of pre-menarcheal training on menstrual practices and hygiene of Nigerian school girls” in The Pan African Medical Journal, conducted in Enugu State, Nigeria, however, ranked school lower in order (Aniebue, Aniebue and Nwankwo 2009). Educated mothers ranked at the top there. In the survey, which aimed at to assess whether pre-menstrual training influenced hygienic menstrual practices, and which gathered information from 500 post-menstrual school-going adolescent girls aged 10-19, it was found that mothers were the primary information providers. TV advertisement about sanitary pad was, however, ranked relatively high. Schools, health workers and media ranked lower in order. The survey also revealed that menstruation was considered very private as it is elsewhere. Public discussion, thus, about menstruation was found to be very limited. There is a substantial continuity in the social message on menstruation. However, the nature of the message has not remained constant over time. This is sketched in Table 5

**Table 5 Continuity and Change in the Nature of Menstrual Message across three Generations**

<b>First generation (Grandmother)</b>	<b>Second generation (Daughter-in-law)</b>	<b>Third generation (Granddaughter)</b>
Menstrual blood and menstrual woman are <u>impure and pollutant</u>	Menstrual blood and menstrual woman are <u>impure and pollutant</u>	Menstrual blood and menstrual woman are impure and pollutant
Need to observe menstrual rules strictly in order to get rid of sin	Need to observe menstrual rules strictly in order to get rid of sin	Menstruation is biological, not divine Some of the rules must largely be observed being a part of the society Should refrain from any contact with deities

Deities, otherwise, would punish self, family and community	Deities, otherwise, would punish self, family and community	Deities, otherwise, could punish self and family
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The source of information, for women in the youngest generation, has been expanded through school curricula, teachers, school friends and media-television in particular. The table also indicates that over a period of time the nature of the message has become more liberal and fuller as well. Women in the third generation are receiving a more accurate, liberal and socially and physiologically balanced message than the previous generations. The young girls have become much more informed on the physio-biological aspects of menstruation in addition to the social aspect. On the other hand, the information women of the previous generations received were largely limited to the social aspect of menstruation. They were informed about the notion and practice of purity and pollution associated with menstruation and with rules and practices of exclusion. In addition, there was a huge emphasis on the fear of god. The continuity and change in the menstrual message largely indicates that control over women's sexuality is gradually weakening although patriarchy is continuously working towards bringing women under societal control by the means of women themselves. It is to be noted that mothers and grandmother pass on just about the same messages of purity and pollution to the youngest generation that they received from their mothers and grandmother. It is the new sources, e.g. schools, teachers, friends, which are passing on new information.

Menstrual messages are changing fast, as can be observed from the altered practices of the youngest generation. The values regarding menstruation as impure and pollutant, however, has remained more or less intact at the core. The youngest generation of women is getting mixed messages. One message expresses the value that menstruation is impure and polluting and that the god and, more so, the ancestral spirit would punish one who does not see it that way. On the other hand, there is also the message that menstruation is something natural and bio-physiological. What is required is personal hygiene and cleanliness not spiritual, religious and social cleansing. This double and contradictory message has created a certain level of ambivalence among women in the youngest generation.

It is worth noting that such ambivalence is also found in other parts of the globe. In an article "Bleeding Out Loud: Communication about

Menstruation” published in *Feminism and Psychology*, Elizabeth Arveda Kissling (1996), using the critical-feminist lens, has analyzed social texts of menstrual socialization, girls’ recorded discussion, mothers’ discussion intended to prepare daughters for their first menstruation, and instructional materials of health education classes in order to explore contemporary menstrual socialization in the United States. This enables Kissling to come to the conclusion that girls in the US get mixed messages about menstruation. The messages consist of both biological and social and emotional aspects of menstruation. One set of message was that menstruation was traumatic and upsetting. Another was that it was an overt symbol of sexual maturity. In between, there was also the message that menstruation is also a secret mystical event.

A message that menstruation is impure and polluting in the religious, ethical and social senses, is in fundamental contradiction with the message that menstruation is a natural and bio-physiological phenomenon. Such contradictory gender messages imparted to women at the first and periodic menstruations bear profound influence on the construction of womanhood and identity.

Expressions such as “you are grown up now, you are not a child anymore;” “you were a son till today, you are a daughter from here onward;” “you are ready for marriage now, so don’t stay out till late at night, anything can happen to a woman;” etc., exert a profound impact on a girl’s identity and passage in life. Bishnu, a third generation woman noted that the expression that “you are not a child but a grown up now” along with the physiological changes I was undergoing completely changed my image about myself. I started perceiving myself as an adult woman, not as a child. I stopped playing with children. Rather I enjoyed in the circle of my elder sisters and aunts”.

For women in the first two generations, most of the messages more or less explicitly hinted of an impending marriage, husband, family, children and married life. Women, as such, and particularly high caste and middle and upper class women, were goaded to learn household chores such as cooking, embroidery and feminine mannerisms, e.g. speaking softly, walking slowly, applying makeup, reciting religious text and stories of idealized women such as Sita and Sabitri, avoiding public exposure to the extent possible and, above all, controlling and managing sexuality. Heera, a 14-year-old Magar girl from the Western Hills, notes that she became menstrual at 13 and goes on to recall the associated gender message. At

that time she was in Grade Six. Her mother told her not to roam around with school boys by herself. “Don’t go to distant places; you aren’t a child now”, she was told. She was a woman. It has been two years now since then. She says she still follows her mother’s instruction. Anu, 16, a resident of a Kathmandu high-caste family, notes that she was told not to wear sleeveless clothes by her mother and grandmother immediately after her first menstruation. She initially got a bit angry. But she has not worn a sleeveless dress since. She does not want to wear such a dress. She says, “too much exposure can cause unnecessary problems in life”.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Almost all women, irrespective of ethnic/caste, class, and spatial location, knew about Menstruation before they came of age. Sources of knowledge, however, were varied by generation. A majority of young women were aware about the bodily process involved in menstruation. A majority of them, however, have a fairly limited knowledge about the physiological side of the menstruation. They knew that menstruation is not only a social phenomenon; it has a physiological basis as well. School texts, curriculum, friends and TV, young clubs were the additional sources for young women to be informed about menstruation besides mother and grandmothers. Mothers and grandmothers, on the other hand, had very little knowledge about the bodily processes involved in menstruation. A majority of them did not even know that they would bleed when they menstruated for the first time. Nobody informed them that it was a physiological process; blood was too dirty or too profane or impure to think and speak about. Neither did they have an opportunity to know the physiology of menstruation from text or other books or through school teachers. They were informed from the early years that menstruation is impure and pollutant and menstrual women are even dangerous for fathers and brothers in particular. Mothers and grandmothers were therefore more concerned purity and pollution regarding menstruation. Their messages to daughters and granddaughters, therefore, consisted mainly of exclusion rules.

Gradual weakening of theological belief or the belief on god, and the emergence of rationality, marked specifically by industrialization and the institution of the market, has globally reduced the intensity of menstrual taboos. There is much debate on the social aspects of menstruation as well. From the Hindu religious point of view, in particular, menstruation is considered impure. Menstruating women are polluting. But the

religious basis of purity and pollution has gradually been weakening due to urbanization, market institutions, the expansion of the public domain, movement of peoples, and the rise of secularism, modernization and individualism. Both the stigma associated with menstrual pollution and the intensity of fear infringing menstrual taboos has been decreasing across the generations.

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