

How Menstruation is shaping Girls' Education in Rural Nepal

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Special Issue 2016

Abstract

With voices for women's education coming from around the globe, it is a real setback when girls are unable to attend schools during their menstruation or periods, a process they encounter every month. The absence of Nepalese rural female students from schools during their periods does not only have the biological aspect to it but incorporates a wide range of social, cultural, familial, and even the economic factors that impact Nepal hindering its economic growth. This paper examines all those factors relating to girls' menstruation and its impact on their schooling in developing countries. Recommendations for possible ways to carve out solutions for developing countries are noted for this global issue.

Keywords: Menstruation, School Girls, Nepal, Menstrual Hygiene, Untouchability, Afghanistan, United Nations Children's Fund, Hindu Religion, *Chaupadi*, Cambodia, Iran

Introduction

Girls not being able to go to schools during their menstruation periods might sound absurd in the urban spots of Nepal but at the rural front, it is still a prevailing phenomenon and a rather daunting one at that. In a survey conducted by WaterAid in Nepal in 2009,

Over half of the respondents in the study reported being absent from school at some time, due to menstruation. Lack of privacy for cleaning and washing was the main reason given, (41 per cent), with other key factors being the lack of availability of disposal system and water supply. (WaterAid, 2009, p. 6)

A Global Concern

The impact of menstruation on access to education is evident in many countries, most of them being developing ones: "More than 20% of girls in Sierra Leone miss school during their periods; in Nepal and Afghanistan the number rises to 30%. In India, almost a quarter of school going girls drop out of school when they start menstruating and the ones that remain miss on average five days a month" (Perczynska & Preiss, 2014, para. 3). According to the United Nations Children's Fund, one in 10 African girls skip school during menstruation.

95% of girls in Ghana sometimes miss school during their periods; 86% and 53% of girls in Garissa and Nairobi respectively and in Kenya they miss a day or more of school every two months; In Ethiopia 51% of girl's miss between one and four days of school per month because of periods; 39% reported reduced performance. (House, Mahon, & Cavill, 2012, p. 31)

Unpreparedness

According to a study from the UN, one out of three girls in South Asia knew nothing about menstruation prior to getting it, while 48% of girls in Iran and 10% of girls in India believe menstruation is a disease (Singh, 2015, para. 3). In Nepal, menstruation is a subject which is not spoken freely about. The time of menstruation is considered dirty and associated with different taboos and this consistently affects the daily life of young girls of the rural areas. With no open discussion taking place within the family, girls are often faced with lack of self-expression which ultimately leads to no prior knowledge about menstruation and its after-effects (Langer, *et al.*, 2015). The Dawn Media Group states that around 90% of women in Pakistan experience pain during menstruation and major cause for negative attitude are lack of information regarding menstruation and about dealing with the pain (as cited in Aflaq & Jami, 2012, p. 203).

The Religious Stance

According to Mishra (2014), Arole mentioned that in South Asia, and in general, a woman in menstruation is often considered a pollutant (as cited in Mishra, 2014, pg. 120). Hindu religious texts regard menstruation as impure and thus menstruating women as impure and as pollutants. For instance, a Brahmin must take a bath and be purified with cow's urine if he is found communicating with a menstruating woman or girl. In Nepal, women and girls are treated as 'untouchables' for at least a week after the end of the menstruation cycle. They are restricted from entering the temple and excluded from all kinds of religious rituals. They cannot look at the sun and cannot read sacred texts.

Hindu groups in Nepal mainly the Newar, Brahmin and Chhetri communities, mark menarche with the custom of '*Gupha Basne*'. "*Gupha Basne* literally means 'staying in a cave' and the tradition entails the young girl to stay in a darkened room for between 12-21 days after the start of her first menstruation avoiding the sight of a man and the sun" (Bennett, 1978, p. 33).

The Discomfort of Bleeding

Menstruation is a painful experience and for the first time, the experience can be an extremely frightening one. Young girls have often found to be panicking once they witness that they are discharging blood leading to think that they are sick or maybe even dying. The pain can be severe sometimes and very challenging to women in any part of the world. The physiological aspect of challenge is universal. Cramps, pain, heavy bleeding, long bleeding, and back pain are common problems for women during menstruation (Moore, 2016). The pain and stress during pain makes it very difficult for the young girls to make it to the schools. According to the World Bank, if a girl misses 4 days of school every 4 weeks due to her period, she will miss 10 to 20 percent of her school days (as cited in Oster & Thornton, 2010, pg. 1).

Menstrual Hygiene

Lack of awareness about menstrual hygiene marked by limited resources for cleanliness has a great impact on the school attendance of female students in the rural areas of Nepal. In Nepal, the majority of women in rural areas use reusable cloths to absorb menstrual blood. The awareness of practices and access to facilities needed to maintain good hygiene during menstruation were generally found to be lacking (WaterAid, 2010).

According to the survey conducted by WaterAid in Nepal in 2009,

Use of sanitary pads was higher among girls in urban schools (50 per cent in contrast to 19 per cent in rural schools). The survey showed girls' reasons for not using sanitary pads included lack of awareness about them (41 per cent), high cost (39 per cent), the fact that they were not easily available (33 per cent), and lack of disposal facilities (24 per cent). Focus group discussions suggested that girls would prefer to use disposable pads as they were more comfortable, less smelly, and easier to use and carry (WaterAid in Nepal 2009, p. 4).

It is not just education that gets affected during menstruation but also the overall health of the women. An unhygienic sanitation practice during menstruation exposes women to risks of different kinds of diseases. 70% of all reproductive diseases in India are caused by poor menstrual hygiene – it can also affect maternal mortality. "In urban India, 43%-88% of girls use reusable cloth during menstruation, yet they are often washed without soap or clean water" (O'Hagan, 2015, para. 3).

Family and Culture

Sometimes the problem starts from home itself. Girls during their periods are considered to be 'impure' and are thus refrained from lots of activities such as not touching men, not touching books, and sleeping and eating in places away from other family members. In a majority of the families, it is the mother who ensures that the daughter follows the untouchability practice. Prohibition to touch books for three to seven days per month is a sure-fire way to negatively impact a girl's education (Hyatt, 2015).

Many households follow the practice of '*Chaupadi*', where menstruating women and

girls are forced to reside in cowsheds away from home. While living in isolation for several days every month, women are faced with several risks and a number of deaths have been reported as a result of animal attacks, hypothermia, fires and many more. "While Nepal's Supreme Court declared *Chaupadi* illegal in 2005, the practice continues today, not only causing girls to miss school but also endangering their health and well-being" (Hyatt, 2015, para. 5).

Facilities at School

Although the majority of public schools in the rural districts of Nepal have separate toilets for girls, they are very poorly managed and the school leadership is uninterested in their proper management and maintenance. There are no water taps in the toilets and to add to the misery of the female students, toilets are built at a distance from the schools as schools are regarded as temples and people do not want to build toilets adjacent to their so-called temples. As a result, female students are forced to carry water for longer distances in order to clean themselves amidst the intimidating glare of both their male and female classmates (IRIN, 2010).

When girls have their periods, teachers give them permission to be absent from school since there is no water and no private space for girls to wash their clothes or replace their sanitary materials. Therefore, despite a desire for education, young girls are forced to stay away from schools during their periods.

The lack of proper sanitation at schools is a problem prevalent in many of the developing countries around the world. "Only 45% of schools in the least developed countries have them; in Nigeria there is one toilet for every 600 students" (Perczynska & Preiss, 2014, para. 4). Many schools in Ethiopia have no bathrooms or latrines which girls describe as an environment that is unsafe and undignified (Lee & Kerner, 2013). "83% of girls in Burkina Faso and 77% in Niger have no place to change their sanitary menstrual materials at school. Similar issues affect girls in India, Cambodia and Iran" (O'Hagan, 2015, para. 1).

Shyness and Humiliation

Humiliation from their male friends is another very strong reason that restricts the female students from going to school during their periods (Onhishi, 2015). Boys would usually laugh at girls' blood stained clothes and also insult them with the derogatory names. In Somalia, there were several cases mentioned of girls changing schools because of the labeling, while one girl was mentioned to nearly have committed suicide (Kohsin, 2014).

Because of the shame factor, the majority of Nepalese school girls decide to either return or remain at their homes, the former as possibly leading to girls losing interest in going to school (Hyatt, 2015).

Conclusion

Apart from Nepal, there are a many other countries too where menstruation is causing female students to miss the quintessential benefits of a school education. Women or girls not being able to go to schools is a great loss not just to a country but to all of humankind. Menstruation is something that is inevitable but what can be prevented is the aftermath of menstruation on the education of young girls and that can only be done after effectively addressing the barriers arising from various fronts.

Policy Recommendations

The solution to the problems in education arising due to menstruation is definitely not as easy as it sounds. However, following recommendations suggest what can be done in order to ensure that girls' education is not compromised because of menstruation and the issues related to it.

- 1. For the Family:** Family has the most important role in assisting young women and girls to tackle the problems during menstruation. Parents need to be made aware about the importance of the education of their girls. They must be convinced that with every year of schooling, the girl child will see a corresponding growth in her future earnings. Also, receiving education she may marry later, have fewer children and is also less likely to experience sexual violence (Perczynska & Preiss, 2014, para. 5). Parents must also be made aware about the ill effects of menstruation-related cultural and religious practices on girls' health and their life. They must also be educated about the importance of menstrual hygiene on the well-being of the girls.
- 2. For the School:** School authorities need to ensure that their resources and facilities are girls-friendly. There must be separate toilets for boys and girls with adequate water supply so that girls can feel at ease during their periods. Teachers must educate both girl and boy students about menstruation and more importantly about the need for boys to be more supportive to girls during menstruation. Also, the provision of sanitary pads and extra clothes at school would surely prompt menstruating girls to come to school. In addition to all of these reasons, schools must also facilitate dialogues among parents, students and the local community in order to break down the taboos relating to menstruation and spread awareness about the importance of girls' education.
- 3. For the Government and Local Authorities:** Government-led awareness programs and policies can be the most useful tool for tackling the taboos of menstruation. However, keeping track on the effective implementation of those policies is very essential. And it must be realized that it is not just the girls and women who benefit from menstruation management.
With every 1% increase in the proportion of women with secondary education, a country's annual per capita income grows by 0.3%. Closing the unemployment gap between adolescent girls and boys would result in an up to 1.2% increase in GDP in a year. (Perczynska & Preiss, 2014, para. 6)

Another role that the government and the local authorities can play is to provide easy access to sanitary items such as menstrual pads, menstrual cups and tampons for use during menstruation. For a wider access, these items could either be provided at subsidized rates or even for free and that could be a significant step towards promoting female education.

- 4. For the Women and Girls:** It is important that women and girls realize the importance of education for a prosperous future with menstruation being one of the few challenges in their quest for education. They must also adhere to the menstrual hygiene standards ensuring a healthy living vital for a purposeful educational journey.
- 5. For Nepal and developing countries such as, India, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Cambodia, Iran, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Pakistan and Kenya:** Needless to say, when we are educating a girl, we are educating the entire family and with that the society as well as the whole nation. Girls' education contributes to a decrease in child marriages, decreased maternal and infant mortality rates, future educated generations, poverty reduction, increased GDP leading to economic growth and much more. The developing countries must therefore realize this and make girls' education one of their top priorities.

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