

How do educated, (upper-)middle class young women in Dhaka talk about and interpret the transformations in their perceptions surrounding menstruation?

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Introduction

Many (anthropological) studies on menstruation, specifically in Bangladesh, are conducted in rural areas or urban slums.

With access to different services and information, young women and girls belonging to the **(upper-)middle class** have unique experiences and perceptions.

During the fieldwork, it was noted that the young women described **a transformation** occurring in their perceptions over the years: the focus of this research.

Methodology

Anthropological fieldwork:
~ Focus group discussions
~ In-depth individual interviews

Participants: 16 women, 21-28 years old, studied at a (private) institution of higher education. Living in Dhaka.

Findings

Initial perceptions (around first period):
~ Dominated by notions of **secrecy and shame** - some as a result of (religious) symbolic framings of menstruation as 'impure' or a taboo.
~ However: individual perceptions diverged with exposure to varying (amounts of) explanations and expectations.

Current perceptions seemed to converge more and were often characterised by **(more) complex understanding** of menstruation, and included:
~ emphasis on the **'normality'** of menstruation;
~ the **denouncement of shame** attached to the issue;
~ awareness of the **biophysical + social connotations**.

In explaining their trajectories of change, the women seemed to emphasise their **own agency and efforts**, but also to the **contingency of life**. Transformations attributed primarily to:
~ Personal quests for (alternative) information
~ Access to new 'open' environments.

Different perceptions were attributed opposing meanings:
~ own current perceptions as **'liberal'** and **positive** (and connected to 'the West' and its (online) cultural influence in Bangladesh).
~ majority of society (incl. past selves) as **'conservative'**, and/or **negative**.

An **awareness of the situatedness of experiences** (including middle-class privileges) was also clearly present: Understanding that **socio-economic status facilitates access** to certain environments, experiences and products that shape perceptions.

Quotes

Yusra: 'I used to feel quite shy talking, even with my friends, but now I'm having this conversation and it is not bothering me at all. [...] Now I'm even comfortable with my male friends also.'

Noshin: 'It just didn't feel right to be ashamed of it. It was happening to me every month and I wanted to learn better ways to cope with it. Like, the first days are the worst, the cramps are the worst, but my mom would always tell me to suck it up and I would be like: "Okay, so I need to find out ways I can cope with it."'

Moneesha: 'On my end it was something very personal, it was just me not wanting to take this thing for granted and suffer every month, just because I have it every month. [...] [I]f I personally believe it's nothing to be ashamed of, it's okay.'

Sokhina (when talking about a religious studies-class): 'I think being exposed to that environment, which was more progressive, more open and that helped me to go through the transition better. And that's when I began to question a lot of things that my mom taught me.'

Nazifa: 'I think perhaps diving into the internet, [...] the normalisation of the way people talked about it, and the sort of abundance of, well, like even jokes about it on the internet, like just memes and things like that, it really does help shift away from the whole taboo aspect of it.'

Noshin: 'I am very privileged and the people you are interviewing are, [too]. So that is very important, because otherwise you don't get the access to knowledge, the access to the other products that you can use. You don't even get to talk about it, and that is very problematic.'

"It just didn't feel right to be ashamed of it"

Transforming perceptions of menstruation in middle-class Bangladesh

