

Menstrual Lives in Rural Ethiopia

Experiences of rural Ethiopian girls and women with managing menstruation throughout the different phases of their menstrual lives in Basona Werana, Amhara, Ethiopia



Figure 1: Rural village in Amhara region, Ethiopia

Recommendations for COWASH based on Master Thesis

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Abstract of Master Thesis

Although menstruation is a natural biological process associated with female health, experiences of girls and women with menstruation is considered an intersectional issue. The main objective of this study was to explore experiences of rural Ethiopian women throughout their menstrual lives in Basona Werana district, in Ethiopia. This study employed several qualitative research methods, namely, community mapping, household observations, in depth semi-structured interviews and key informant interviews. The life course perspective was applied in this study to identify four distinct phases in girls' and women's menstrual lives, namely, the adolescent phase, the single phase, the married phase and the widowed or divorced phase. Each of these phases marks important changes in the role that boys and men play in the menstrual lives of women, the sanitation infrastructure and menstrual material accessed and the knowledge girls and women have in terms of menstruation. The study employed a theory-driven approach and therefore three different theoretical angles were used (the gender angle, the cultural angle and the structural angle). Gender norms and the gender-discriminatory environment were considered as an overarching concept that played a decisive role in the different phases of girls' and women's menstrual lives. Furthermore, several dimensions of structural violence (access to knowledge and access to financial resources) and cultural violence (symbolism and taboo) were found to play a crucial role in girls' and women's menstrual lives. This study, furthermore, found that the menstrual lives of girls and women in low- and middle-income countries are often lived in a solitude manner with girls and women being restricted in their religious, sexual and hygienic actions during menstruation throughout their life spans.

Key words: gender norms (and roles/identities), cultural violence, menstruation, structural violence, symbolism, taboo,

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1. Introduction

On a global level, around 52% of the female population, which corresponds to 26% of the total population, is of reproductive age (House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012). Most of these girls and women experience menstruation every month, which is a natural biological process of the female body (House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012). The management of menstruation presents significant challenges for women in lower income settings (Sumpter and Torondel, 2013). According to a knowledge, practice and attitude survey conducted by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), amongst other studies, Ethiopia is a country in which menstrual management, still poses challenges for girls and women (Tegege and Sisay, 2014; Sommer, Ackatia-armah, *et al.*, 2015; Smiles, Short and Sommer, 2017; United Nations Children's Fund, 2017). Previous research, both in Ethiopia and in other LMICs, have found that boys and men play a role in the menstrual management of girls and women (Mahon, Tripathy and Singh, 2015; Sommer, Ackatia-armah, *et al.*, 2015; Kuhlmann, Henry and Wall, 2017; Mason *et al.*, 2017). But it is unclear how men play a role in menstruation. Therefore, in order to expand the evidence base on menstruation and serve as a guidance for policy interventions, this study attempts to understand the experiences that girls and women in rural Ethiopia have of menstrual management and how men are perceived to influence these experiences.

2. Research Question and Research Objectives

The main research question for this study is:

How do rural Ethiopian girls and women experience their menstrual lives in Basona Werana, Ethiopia?

The main objective of this study is *to explore experiences of rural Ethiopian girls and women throughout their menstrual lives in Basona Werana, Ethiopia*

And the specific objectives are:

- *To investigate rural Ethiopian girls' and women's experiences of menstrual hygiene management in different phases of their menstrual lives.*
- *To investigate how rural Ethiopian girls and women perceive men to influence their menstrual management in different phases of their menstrual lives.*
- *To discuss how cultural and structural violence play a role in rural Ethiopian women's experiences of their menstrual menstruation throughout their menstrual lives'.*

3. Conceptual framework

In order to investigate rural Ethiopian women's experiences in menstrual management and the role of men in menstrual management, the life course perspective was applied. Therefore, the different phases of women's menstrual lives are presented and how girls and women experienced these phases, using the life course perspective. The following phases have been identified:

Phase 1: Managing menstruation in adolescence

Phase 2: Managing menstruation as a single woman

Phase 3: Managing menstruation in a marriage

Phase 4: Managing menstruation when divorced or widowed

In life course research and specifically when using the life history method, typical life cycles are described using 'developmental' stages that are most commonly identified with. The data collected for this study was segmented into the above phases, with each phase marking a vital social and relational change in women's menstrual lives. Furthermore, the experiences of rural Ethiopian women with regards to menstruation were analysed from three different angles, namely, the gender angle, the cultural angle and the structural angle.

3.1 The Gender Angle

Gender norms are sociocultural prescriptions of how people should act and behave in accordance with their gender (Griffin, 2017). Menstruation and the way menstruation is managed and perceived is very associated with and shaped by the existing gender norms and roles in the societies in which women manage their menstruation.

3.2 The Cultural Angle

Aside from the gendered context in which women manage their menstruation, cultural violence which is directly linked with the symbolism attached to menstruation, and therefore concepts of purity and cleanliness and taboos, plays a role in the experiences of menstruation of girls and women. Galtung defines the terms cultural violence as *'any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form'* (Galtung, 1990). In this study, cultural violence plays a role in explaining how symbolic meanings attached to menstruation, derived from aspects of culture, play a role in the experience of girls and women in their menstrual lives

3.3 The Structural Angle

Finally, in order to take a higher analytical view on the structural dimensions which influence menstrual management, the term structural violence was used in this study. Structural violence was

first coined by sociologist Johan Galtung in 1969 in *Violence, Peace and Peace Research* (Galtung, 1969). According to Galtung 'violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations' (Galtung, 1969). The gender norms embedded within Ethiopian society with regards to access to education, health and economic activity all lead to inequalities and unequal distribution of power, which is what is known as structural violence. This in turn affects the menstrual experiences of girls and women and the way men play a role in these.

4. Methodology

4.1 Study site

The data collection for this study was conducted in Ethiopia on the Horn of Africa, and more specifically, in a rural district of the Amhara region. Selection and access to the study site was facilitated by a third party known as the Community-Led Accelerated WASH (COWASH) project which is a bilateral water, sanitation and hygiene project between the Government of Finland (GoF) and the Government of Ethiopia (GoE), led by the Ministry of Water, Irrigation and Energy of Ethiopia (Community Managed Project Approach, 2019). The specific district and village that was selected for this study was selected as it is typical for the sociocultural context in Amhara.

4.2 Study Design

In this study, as mentioned earlier a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was applied as the overall research aim was to understand women's perception of the phenomenon of menstruation. Several research methods were employed, namely, observational methods (community mapping and household observation) as well as interview methods (semi structured in-depth interviews and key informant interviews). This is also known as triangulation as several qualitative methods of data collection were used in order to ensure comprehensiveness and encourage a more reflexive analysis (Mays and Pope, 2000). It is important to mention that the language spoken throughout Amhara and in the specific study site is Amharic, therefore all the data was collected with a translator that spoke both English and Amharic.

4.3 Data Analysis

A theory-driven phenomenological approach drawing on the previously described three angles of theory was employed. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008) the central idea of phenomenological research is *'understanding people from their own frame of reference and experiencing reality as they experience it'* (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Furthermore, Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault (2016) argue that qualitative research often takes an inductive approach and concepts and theories are developed based on patterns in the data (Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault, 2016). However, as the topic of menstruation is not new, and has been linked to concepts and theories before, the approach to theory in this study is not inductive. Therefore, the concepts and theories discussed earlier play a role in explaining the phenomenon but the way the data is analysed with the theory is not predetermined and the way theory was applied and engaged changed and formed along the way, as the analysis progressed.

5. Discussion

This study found that girls and women manage their menstruation in a highly gendered context. The finding of a highly gendered 'menstruation context' in this study is not unique to Ethiopia or to the topic of menstruation but is an issue across different sociocultural contexts as well as in other fields of sanitation. Not only gender norms but also gender identities play a role. This study found that through performing the constructed gender identities ascribed to Ethiopian girls and women, the gender order is maintained all the way from early school time into married life and later, and the structures within society causing structural violence persist. The experience of Ethiopian girls' and women's menstrual management is greatly influenced by this order of gender identities. Aside from issues directly related to gender as mentioned the concepts of structural and cultural violence also played a role in the experiences of girls and women with menstruation.

5.1 Dimensions of structural violence

Two main aspects of structural violence were identified in this study, namely, access to knowledge for menstrual management and access to financial resources for menstrual management.

Access to knowledge for menstrual management

The data collected demonstrated issues of structural violence in educational attainment of rural Ethiopian women compared to men, as girls simply didn't have access to good 'menstrual education' because of persisting educational inequalities. Furthermore, the data from this study about the school phase of women's lives demonstrated that for those girls and women that have attended some type of formal education, a gender-discriminatory environment was often encountered in school. Additionally, it was found that the role of mothers both in rural and urban

settings is decisive in girls' access to knowledge. This is not a unique finding of this study but is also evident in other parts of Ethiopia, both in rural and in urban settings.

Access to financial resources for menstrual management

Another important dimension of structural violence that became evident in this study is girls' and women's access to financial resources for managing menstruation. It was found that gender norms and roles prescribe that men hold the financial resources in the household unless women somehow make their own income (e.g. through selling milk). This jeopardizes menstruation and its management for girls and women, as it affects access to girls' and women's preferred menstrual material. One could therefore argue that control of access to financial resources by women is a form of structural violence that restricts women from using the MHM material they prefer.

5.2 Dimensions of cultural violence in menstrual lives

There are many different aspects of the Ethiopian culture used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form. This is also known as cultural violence. Many studies based in school settings in LMICs have demonstrated that women are seen as 'dirty' or 'impure' when menstruating and menstruation is considered a taboo (Adinma, E. D., & Adinma, 2008; House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012; Miiro *et al.*, 2018; Hennegan *et al.*, 2019; Rheinländer *et al.*, 2019). In this study, this perception was widely evident as well. According to the women interviewed, this directly contributed to the behaviour of boys and men concerning menstruation. This restriction is not unique to Amhara, Ethiopia, but is an intrinsic religious restriction in Christianity, adhered to in many different countries across the world, according to a literature review on sexual intercourse and menstruation (Medicine *et al.*, 2018).

Moreover, this study found that menstruation is associated with the loss of virginity and that this perpetuates the secrecy associated with menstruation.

This study demonstrated that in rare cases husbands and fathers played a supportive role in menstruation. However, in most cases, men contribute to the secretive environment surrounding menstruation, as their perception of menstruation is strongly related to the symbolic meanings of menstruation.

6. Recommendations

There are several ways in which the experiences of girls and women with menstruation could be improved. The Ethiopian Ministry of Health introduced an MHM policy and implementation guideline (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Ministry of Health(FMOH), 2016). An important part of this guideline is the concept of an 'MHM room' (a designated room on the school

compound where girls can go to change or wash their menstrual material or rest). The data available on the extent to which this 'MHM room' has actually been implemented in schools is very limited. However, in this study context a room such as this would definitely assist girls, with maintaining menstrual privacy, since they were highly exposed when asked to use classrooms for managing their menstruation. Therefore, it is highly recommended to implement the MHM room more widely in Ethiopia. This would help girls in managing their menstruation adequately in the school phase of their lives and further counter the gender-discriminatory environment in which girls have to manage their menstruation.

As mentioned earlier, this study, along with other studies in Ethiopia has found that mothers play an important role in providing information and insights concerning menstruation (and its management) to girls. Based on this study's findings, it is recommended to start communications with mothers in future menstrual management promotion and awareness raising campaigns by development and government institutions. However, behaviour change in mothers can also play a role in not passing on the secrecy surrounding menstruation to their daughters. This requires more than just access to knowledge, for mothers, it also demands behaviour change (which is strongly linked to cultural norms and values) and therefore is more challenging to achieve. Therefore, it is recommended to focus on other aspects of menstruation (aside from management), both for mothers and the broader communities, as the misconceptions and symbolic meanings attached to menstruation are conducive to the challenging environment in which menstruation has to be managed. Health Extension Workers can facilitate this kind of awareness raising campaigns, as they can be considered gatekeepers in the communities, they work in. Furthermore, as behaviour change is difficult to achieve and takes time, it is important to create safe spaces and small female communities in which girls and women can discuss menstruation freely and openly with each other. Such frameworks already exist (e.g. girls club) however, it is recommended that menstruation becomes a more prominent topic within these frameworks.

Aside from struggles related to the environment in schools and access to knowledge, it is important to improve access to financial resources which would give girls and women agency to buy their preferred MHM material. This can be achieved through providing more job opportunities for women in the WASH sector or elsewhere. However, it is also important to raise awareness amongst men as they often hold the financial resources in the household and are decision makers in the household. It is important that they understand the needs of women when they menstruate.

Little research has investigated this aspect of MHM from the men's perspectives. We therefore know very little about the reasons for not giving wives and daughters access to their preferred menstrual materials. In essence, it is still unclear why women do not ask for financial resources for their menstrual needs, but it is important to highlight that this might not be because of unwillingness from men's side. Based on evidence in this study, one can hypothesize that it might be related to the taboo associated with menstruation and the gendered context in which menstruation is managed. However, this needs to be further investigated through research that directly involves men. Therefore, further research concerning menstruation and its challenges (especially those related to men) is also recommended.

This study has shown that menstruation is an intersectional issue that has implications for different aspects of rural Ethiopian girls' and women's lives, e.g. economic, social, educational as well as health, throughout the different phases of their lives. Furthermore, the environment in which menstruation is managed, socially and physically, is embedded within gender norms. The diminished opportunities for girls and women to manage their menstruation within the sociocultural context and the gender norms related with this, enhance structural and cultural violence throughout their menstrual lives. Additionally, structural and cultural violence also reinforce gender norms as they diminish opportunities for girls and women, throughout the different phases of their menstrual lives. Moreover, this study concurs with the existing evidence field when finding that the menstrual lives of girls and women in low- and middle-income countries are often lived in a solitude manner with girls and women being restricted in their religious, sexual and hygienic actions during menstruation throughout the life spans. The data has clearly shown that the gender-discriminatory environment and the symbolism attached to menstruation in school and in marriage related has detrimental consequences for girls and women and the way they experience their menstrual lives.

This study has offered several recommendations on how to improve the menstrual lives of girls and women in rural Ethiopia through aiming to target some of the gendered, structural and cultural aspects of menstruation. As girls and women's experiences with menstruation differs across areas (urban/rural) and sociocultural contexts in Ethiopia and in other LMICs it is important to conduct further research on menstruation and how it is experienced in other areas and contexts. Furthermore, it is important to conduct further research involving men and their perceptions of menstruation.

