

Menstrual health practices among Tibetan women: An ethnographic participant observation study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Menstruation is a universal human experience, yet cultural narratives and societal attitudes around it differ greatly, impacting women's and girls' lives all around the world. It is often associated with shame and silence. **Objective:** This research study examines ethnographic data collected from Tibetan in-exile women in Himachal Pradesh, India. The study aims to explore the menstrual experiences, menstrual health, and hygiene management among Tibetan-in-exile women in Himachal Pradesh, India. **Methodology:** The data was collected from eleven participants through participant observation. All eleven participants were observed during their menstrual cycle period. Menstrual health observations were conducted and major insights were identified. Textual analysis using R-software was conducted to get results. **Results:** Tibetan women showed neutral to positive sentiments towards menstruation. Most participants reflected comfort and calmness through non-verbal communication and body language during their periods. They showcased responsible behaviour in the disposal of used sanitary products. Tibetan-in-exile women emphasized the need for privacy and space to manage hygiene during periods.

Keywords: Ethnographic, experiences, menstruation, practices, qualitative, Tibetan-in-exile, women

Introduction

Menstruation is a natural process and is experienced differently among women from various cultures.^[1] According to contemporary Tibetan medical literature, menstruation (*gla mtshan*) is defined as a characteristic of the female body.^[2,3] Regular menstruation is an important indicator of good reproductive health and a sign of a healthy and fertile female.^[4] The significance of menstruation and perception varies in different cultures^[5] as per the different beliefs and is either considered empowering or shameful.^[6,7] One of the primary concerns of Sustainable Development Goals is to improve sexual

and reproductive health.^[8] Menstruation frequently poses psychological, social, and health challenges for young women living in LMIC.^[9-11] Women tend to ignore their reproductive health and are mostly found irresponsible. Evidence shows that mothers are reluctant to talk with their daughters about reproductive health.^[12,13] Menstruation is not widely spoken about.^[4,14] A study conducted on reproductive health communication found poor communication among daughters and mothers.^[12] There are cultural codes that exist among women in different communities.^[14]

In some settings, menstruation is viewed as impure and many people tend to internalize such taboos and social beliefs.^[1,15] Therefore, they are affected by the lack of knowledge and education which ultimately leads to adverse outcomes for their sexual health.^[16,17] This was supported by the study conducted^[18] which indicated that a lack of conversation about menstruation

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may contribute to a lack of hygiene^[19,20] and increase the chances of infections among the women. A lack of supportive communication related to menstruation was depicted in many studies.^[21-23] Support related to menstrual management is expected from people around us, especially from family and friends. Lack of support from the partner may often lead to emotional lows among the women.^[15]

There are restrictions associated with menstruation and there are various taboos and customs.^[24,25] In a research study, girls observe various restrictions for not being allowed to participate in any religious activity.^[26] Restriction seldom includes a particular diet and relief from household work. Many women experience discomfort during periods.^[26] Most of the experiences shared by women showcase that there is a lack of facilities^[27] with no private spaces which depicts environmental constraints. Poor awareness among adolescent girls in North India^[28] and poor menstrual hygiene practices can affect reproductive health. WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) conditions in schools of LMIC were reported to be inadequate.^[4,29]

Negative views of menstruation are ubiquitous globally among women.^[30] Most women experience premenstrual syndrome (PMS) which includes emotional and physical symptoms that occur between one or two weeks before menstruation.^[31,32] A study depicts body appreciation as correlated to a positive attitude toward menstruation.^[33] A research study reflects that Tibetan women follow stigma despite Tibetan culture being more progressive towards women than other Asian women.^[6,34] Many of the women are still burdened with the adverse views of ancient Tibetan culture. Therefore, further research on the personal experiences of Tibetan women with menstruation is done. The study aims to explore the menstrual experiences, menstrual health observations, and hygiene management among Tibetan-in-exile women in Himachal Pradesh, India.

Material and Methods

Study design

An ethnographic participatory research approach was used to achieve the objectives of the study on the Tibetan-in-exile settlement in McLeodganj. This qualitative approach helped to get an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of the women. The participatory aspect of the research led to overt observation which helped in getting a comprehensive understanding of the menstrual practices among the community.

Study setting

The study was conducted in McLeodganj, Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh. The home to the 14th Dalai Lama and the majority of the population of the Tibetan-in-exile community resides here. Dharamshala is the home to precisely 15,000 people, the second largest population of Tibetan refugees in Himachal Pradesh, India.^[6]

Population and sample

The population comprised Tibetan women living in McLeodganj, Dharamshala. Nonprobability, purposive, and snowball sampling were used to sample eleven participants. The topic of menstruation is sensitive therefore, anonymity was provided to each participant. Only those participants were recruited who voluntarily were interested in becoming part of the research. Data was collected through participant observations which included the use of an observation guide, unstructured conversations, and field notes. Data was analyzed using R software to do the text analysis. The data was presented in the form of tables.

Site access

The entry to the community site was done with the help of a nongovernmental organization working for Tibetan-in-exile women in different regions of India. The main office of the organization is in McLeodganj and they agreed to provide help and a research assistant from the community helped the researcher to build rapport with other members of the community.

Data collection

Data was collected by the female researcher who lived with the Tibetan community for about 6 months. All participant observations were conducted during this period. Verbal consent was taken prior collection of data. To protect their identity, the anonymity of all participants was maintained. The participants were referred to by pseudonyms P01, P02, and so on to P11. During the menstrual cycle of the participants, each of them gave consent for 2 or 3 days for carrying out the observation. The date of the period was asked and by tracking the period date for each month the observation was conducted on the available slots. The study was conducted with 11 participants, who volunteered, and had experienced menarche but had not yet reached menopause.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Textual analysis using R-software. The observations were carried out for 11 participants according to their availability, consent, and most importantly cycle dates. Text analysis, also known as text mining or text analytics, involves the automated extraction and classification of information from text data.^[35] This study employs text analysis using R-software to analyze data from eleven participants observed for their menstrual health behaviors and characteristics.

The data [Table 1] shows different ages women from teenagers to middle-aged women. Five participants were between the ages of 20–30, four participants were between the ages of 31–41 and two were teenagers. Two teens, two unmarried, and seven married women were observed for the participant observation. The two teens were pursuing studies and were in the class tenth and twelfth, respectively. 4 of the participants did go to high school, 2 went to secondary school and 3 completed their bachelor's degree.

Table 1: Participant demographics and background

Attributes	Categories	No. of participants
Age Groups	Teenagers	2
	20–30 years	5
	31–41 years	4
Marital Status	Married	7
	Unmarried	2
	Teens	2
Education	High School	4
	Secondary School	2
	Bachelor's Degree	3
Family Size	Family size of four	8
	Family size of five	3
Language Preferences	English and Tibetan	7
	Hindi and Tibetan	4
Observation Duration	2 days	5
	3 days	6
Menstrual Health Details	Regular menstrual cycles	11
Cycle Duration	Varies between 3 and 7 days	11

Family size varies among the participants, three participants had a family size of five, and eight participants had a family size of four. The language used for conversing is mostly English and Tibetan. The remaining four participants preferred to speak Hindi and Tibetan. The most common employment status among participants is shop owner, which indicates engagement in entrepreneurial activities within the community. All participants were granted permission for the researcher to observe them for the study. The number of days varies between two or three days. Participants consented to observation for either 2 or 3 days. A majority (8 participants) consented for 3 days, while the remaining 5 participants consented for 2 days. The higher number of participants consenting to a longer observation period may suggest a willingness to engage more deeply in the study, possibly indicating trust in the research process. All female participants experienced regular periods. The number of days of the menstrual cycle varies between 3-7 days for all of them.

Based on the keyword extraction and frequency analysis, the prominent topics in 'Menstrual Health Observations' [Table 2] revolve around the characteristics of menstrual flow, the use of menstrual products, and the timing and tracking of the menstrual cycle. The topic related to menstrual flow indicates a significant concern or area of interest. The topic of menstrual products shows keywords like 'pads' suggest that the type and usage of menstrual products are a key focus and in menstrual cycle timing, keywords such as 'day' and 'days' likely refer to discussions around the menstrual cycle length or regularity. These insights highlight the primary concerns and areas of interest among participants regarding menstrual health.

The common themes include expressions of comfort and irritation when discussing menstruation. Keywords such as 'exhibits,' 'signs,' 'irritation,' 'frowning eyebrows,' and 'engaging'

suggest a range of emotional responses and body language cues. Participants Table 3 positive sentiment score (1.00) is associated with keywords like "confidence," "comfort," "openness," and "positive attitude," indicating a positive approach to discussing menstruation.

The dataset suggests a complex interplay between nonverbal cues and social interactions when discussing sensitive topics like menstruation [Table 3]. Cultural and gender dynamics significantly influence communication patterns, with some participants displaying more openness in certain social contexts. The uniform sentiment scores in the 'Social Interactions and Communication' column may indicate a limitation in the dataset. Discussions about menstruation are often gender-sensitive, with some participants more comfortable in female-centric spaces. There is a supportive environment within families and among colleagues, as indicated by keywords like "comfortably discusses," "supportive husband," and "shared understanding." Cultural norms and societal expectations play a role in how menstruation is discussed, as seen in keywords like "cultural norms," "deep-rooted cultural boundaries," and "nuanced navigation [Table 4]."

The analysis reveals that while there is a general trend of comfort and openness in discussing menstruation, this is often moderated by the presence of male family members or colleagues, and by cultural norms. Nonverbal communication plays a significant role in conveying sentiments, with a range of emotions being expressed through body language. The sentiment analysis indicates a generally neutral to positive sentiment in nonverbal communication, but the lack of variation in the sentiment scores for social interactions suggests that further investigation may be needed to understand the subtleties of these interactions.

Neutral to positive sentiment in nonverbal communication indicates that the nonverbal cues exhibited by participants during interactions are generally either neutral or convey positive emotions. Nonverbal communication includes facial expressions, gestures, posture, and other physical behaviors that can express a range of emotions without words. The positive sentiment could imply comfort, agreement, or positive engagement among participants. A neutral sentiment suggests a controlled, calm, or neutral atmosphere where no significant negative emotions are being expressed. The observation of limited variation in sentiment scores during social interactions could mean the participants may have similar cultural or social norms that govern their expressions of emotion, leading to uniformity in how they express themselves nonverbally. This could be particularly relevant in this study involving a specific community or group, such as Tibetan women in exile, where shared experiences and cultural backgrounds might lead to more uniform behaviors.

Each category has a maximum value of 1, meaning that in the observed instances, each category was mentioned at least once for each participant. This shows that all three categories are present in the analyzed texts and that there are specific situations in which these factors are particularly relevant.

Table 2: Trending topics identification - menstrual health observations

Trending Topics Identification	
Menstrual Flow	Intensity and duration of menstrual flow
Menstrual Products	Usage and type of products such as pads
Menstrual Cycle Timing	Regularity and length of the menstrual cycle

Table 3: Nonverbal communication keywords, social interactions and communication keywords

Nonverbal Communication	Social Interactions and Communication
Mean Sentiment Score: 0.09	Mean Sentiment Score: 0.00 (indicating a neutral sentiment on average)
Standard Deviation: 0.30	Standard Deviation: 0.00 (no variation in sentiment scores)
Minimum Sentiment Score: 0.00	Minimum Sentiment Score: 0.00
Maximum Sentiment Score: 1.00	Maximum Sentiment Score: 0.00

Environmental cues [Table 5] are mentioned with slightly lower frequency on average compared to other categories, suggesting that environmental cues may be less frequently observed or less often reported in the analyzed data. Behavioral patterns have the highest average counts, indicating that behaviors are more frequently noted or more relevant to the analysis being performed. Access to resources has a similar mean to environmental indices, which could mean that access to resources is also a less dominant factor in the data or less frequently cited. Behavioral patterns are most strongly represented in the text data, indicating the high importance of hygiene and environmentally conscious behavior. Environmental stimuli and access to resources are less frequently mentioned but are still important aspects in the context of menstrual hygiene. The specific instances in which these factors are particularly salient should be examined in more detail to understand the underlying contexts and possible cultural or individual differences in the approach to menstrual hygiene.

Discussion

Tibetan women face less stigma, menstrual restrictions, and barriers associated with menstruation.^[6] Similarly, the findings of this study suggest that Tibetan women have supportive conversations with partners, friends, or family. The data extracted from participant observation of eleven participants show different age ranges. Most of the participants were married and at least went to high school. The language used depicts the merging of cultures as they have fluency in English and Hindi along with the Tibetan language. Keyword extraction and frequency analysis resulted in the major observations which include menstrual flow, menstrual product use, and timing of periods. All participants reported regular cycles and flow ranging from 3 to 7 days. The majority of the participants reported menstrual product disposal behavior as positive. Contrary to many studies which depict poor menstrual hygiene management among females.^[36-38] The nonverbal cues suggest an expression of comfort and irritation while discussing menstruation. Similar to studies that show emotional impact on women.^[39,40] Neutral to positive

sentiments were reflected among the participants expressed through body language. The positive sentiments score suggested that most of the participants were comfortable while discussing menstruation. Keywords like confidence, comfort, openness, and positive attitude indicate a positive approach to discussing menstruation. Similarly, many studies which highlighted the positive views on menstruation and comfortable spaces.^[7,30,41] Discussions are gender sensitive among some participants in this study, indicating more comfort in female-centric environments. Communication with mother and female friends is more comfortable.^[27] Environment cues show good adaptability and preparation. There is a high level of pro-activeness among the Tibetan women as they are aware of being prepared by carrying sanitary pads in advance and drinking more amount of water and tea during those days. The preparedness with emergency kits and resource access for menstrual management is mostly found among Tibetan women. Responsible behavior for disposing of the used pads is portrayed by the participants during observation. The behavior pattern of most participants reflects the importance of hygiene and environmentally conscience behavior. This finding is of utmost importance and shows the responsible management of menstruation among Tibetan-in-exile women. The participants showcased their preference for privacy and space during menstrual days.

Conclusion

Menstruation is a sensitive issue that is not welcomed for open discussion in many communities.^[42] Tibetan community living in exile at McLeodganj had different stances towards the taboo topic. A few women hesitated to be a part of the research study while many women were eager to participate. The qualitative data provides in-depth insights and prominent topics in 'Menstrual Health Observations' revolved around the characteristics of menstrual flow, the use of menstrual products, and the timing of the menstrual cycle.

The participant observation data highlights bilingual or multilingual communities with strong cultural ties. The trending topics in menstrual health emphasize the importance of understanding menstrual flow characteristics, product usage, and cycle timing among Tibetan women. The sentiment analysis indicates neutral to positive sentiment in nonverbal communication. The positive sentiment implied comfort, agreement, or positive engagement among participants. A neutral sentiment suggests a controlled, calm, or neutral atmosphere where no significant negative emotions are being expressed. A study of this nature will provide a frame of reference for the development of menstrual hygiene management intervention and improve the psychological health and well-being of women. These insights are essential for developing targeted interventions or products to meet the community's health needs.

Study limitations

The execution of the study faced some challenges and limitations. The ethnographic approach of the research study around the

Table 4: Keywords generated through R-analysis

Pseudonym	Tokenized Menstrual Health Observations
P01	['initial', 'two', 'days', 'of', 'heavy', 'flow', 'followed', 'by', 'normal', 'flow', 'concluding', 'after', '34', 'days', 'personal', 'experiences', 'and', 'practices', 'show', 'changing', 'pad', 'thrice', 'in', 'two', 'days', 'and', 'the', 'third', 'day', 'only', 'twice']
P02	['experiences', 'a', 'heavy', 'flow', 'on', 'the', 'first', 'day', 'followed', 'by', 'a', 'normal', 'flow', 'lasting', '5', 'or', '6', 'days', 'she', 'changes', 'pads', 'every', '4', 'hours', 'to', 'manage', 'her', 'menstrual', 'hygiene']
P03	['reports', 'that', 'her', 'periods', 'last', 'for', '4', 'or', '5', 'days', 'without', 'exceeding', 'five', 'days', 'she', 'opts', 'for', 'wing', 'pads', 'to', 'manage', 'a', 'heavy', 'flow', 'indicating', 'a', 'personalized', 'approach', 'to', 'menstrual', 'hygiene']
P04	['manages', 'a', 'heavy', 'flow', 'with', 'xxl', 'pads', 'adjusting', 'pad', 'usage', 'for', 'day', 'and', 'night', 'experiences', 'reduced', 'appetite', 'during', 'menstruation', 'but', 'finds', 'relief', 'in', 'warm', 'beverages']
P05	['practices', 'diligent', 'menstrual', 'hygiene', 'using', 'the', 'restroom', 'in', 'a', 'nearby', 'restaurant', 'twice', 'a', 'day', 'and', 'changing', 'her', 'pad', 'once', 'carried', 'in', 'a', 'separate', 'pouch', 'for', 'discretion', 'and', 'convenience', 'she', 'emphasizes', 'cleanliness', 'carrying', 'sanitizer', 'and', 'using', 'regular', 'size', 'pads', 'reflecting', 'her', 'personal', 'preference']
P06	['experiences', 'heavy', 'flow', 'and', 'opts', 'for', 'longer', 'sanitary', 'pads', 'to', 'manage', 'her', 'menstrual', 'hygiene', 'effectively', 'she', 'changes', 'pads', 'twice', 'during', 'work', 'and', 'prefers', 'using', 'her', 'home', 'toilet', 'avoiding', 'public', 'facilities', 'to', 'maintain', 'comfort', 'and', 'privacy']
P07	['the', 'initial', 'day', 'of', 'her', 'menstrual', 'cycle', 'is', 'particularly', 'challenging', 'leading', 'her', 'to', 'refrain', 'from', 'painting', 'however', 'by', 'the', 'third', 'day', 'she', 'resumes', 'her', 'artistic', 'work', 'throughout', 'her', 'period', 'she', 'increases', 'her', 'water', 'intake', 'carrying', 'an', 'extra', 'water', 'bottle', 'to', 'stay', 'hydrated']
P08	['experiences', 'a', 'normal', 'menstrual', 'flow', 'and', 'effectively', 'manages', 'her', 'menstruation', 'with', 'the', 'use', 'of', 'sanitary', 'pads', 'her', 'preparedness', 'and', 'routine', 'adjustment', 'during', 'her', 'cycle', 'illustrate', 'her', 'proactive', 'approach', 'to', 'managing', 'menstrual', 'health', 'without', 'disrupting', 'her', 'professional', 'life']
P09	['prefers', 'period', 'panties', 'at', 'night', 'and', 'large-sized', 'pads', 'during', 'the', 'day', 'for', 'the', 'initial', 'three', 'days', 'then', 'switches', 'to', 'regular', 'pads', 'for', 'the', 'remainder', 'of', 'the', 'menstrual', 'cycle', 'for', 'better', 'management']
P10	['experiences', 'a', 'heavy', 'flow', 'on', 'the', 'first', 'day', 'of', 'her', 'cycle', 'which', 'gradually', 'slows', 'down', 'she', 'manages', 'her', 'menstruation', 'effectively', 'keeping', 'a', 'stock', 'of', 'sanitary', 'pads', 'ready', 'each', 'month']
P11	['experiences', 'a', 'normal', 'menstrual', 'flow', 'but', 'suffers', 'from', 'back', 'pain', 'during', 'her', 'cycle']

sensitive topic of menstruation was to be studied and observed, the researcher took a few months to build rapport with the community. During participatory observation, overt observation was conducted which might have led to an alteration in the behavior of the participants unconsciously or consciously.

Table 5: Categories and analyzed texts

Categories	Analyzed texts
Environmental Cues	Data shows that preparing for menstruation, such as having hygiene products on hand and drinking more water or tea, is frequently mentioned. This indicates a high level of awareness and pro-activeness regarding menstrual hygiene.
Behavioral Patterns	Hygienic practices, such as washing and properly disposing of used products, are also prominently represented. Using separate containers for hygiene products and burning used products demonstrate responsible behavior when dealing with menstrual waste.
Resource Access	The use of toilets at work or restaurants and the availability of menstrual emergency kits indicate good adaptability and preparation. The preference for private spaces for menstrual hygiene underlines the need for privacy.

Also, though the study is approached qualitatively and provides comprehensive findings, the results cannot be generalized. The results can serve as a beginning for longitudinal studies or qualitative studies for a longer duration of time.

Recommendations for future interventions

- There should be increased efforts to ensure that modern menstrual products and technologies are more accessible.
- Educational programs should be designed to be culturally sensitive yet progressive. They should aim to educate women and girls about menstrual health in ways that respect traditional beliefs while incorporating modern health practices.
- It is crucial to facilitate community-wide dialogues to normalize menstruation and reduce the stigma associated with it. These dialogues should involve all genders and age groups to ensure comprehensive community engagement and support.

Ethical considerations

There is no formal ethical committee to seek the permission for accessing health practices among the Tibetan community. Ethical approval was sought from community leaders and participants involved in the study, upholding the ethical standards throughout the research process. Prior to commencing the study, a formal entry was sought and granted by the Tibetan Women's Association (TWA), which played a crucial role in facilitating access to the community. Tibetan Women's Association (TWA) is a non-governmental organization which is set up by the Tibetan in exile government for helping Tibetan women. (Formal request was made on 9 March, 2023 via email and followed by personal visit at the main office TWA, Dharamshala).

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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