

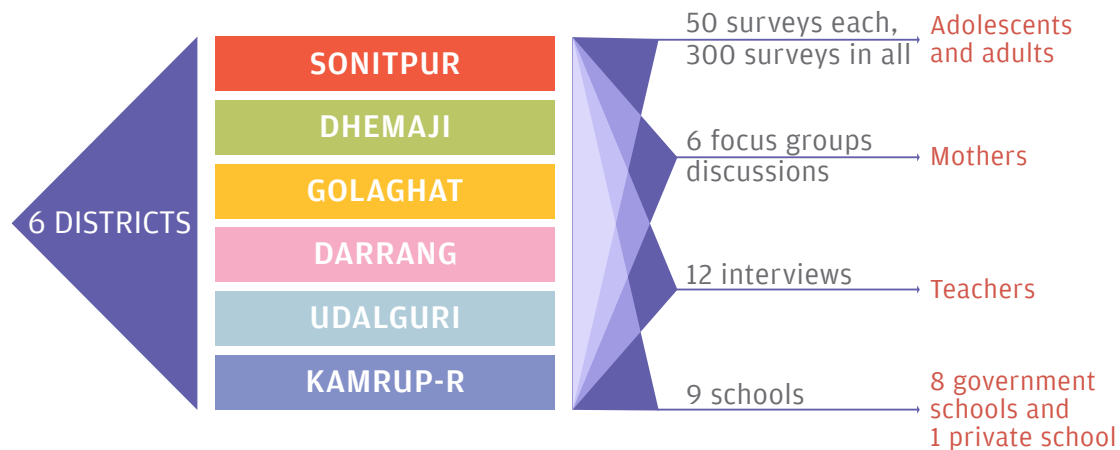
MENSTRUAL HEALTH & HYGIENE PRACTICES AND BELIEFS IN RURAL AREAS

A SURVEY IN 6 DISTRICTS OF ASSAM

North East Network, 2024

Introduction

North East Network conducted a survey on *Menstrual Health & Hygiene Practices and Beliefs in Rural Areas* in Assam. The survey is scoping in nature and is expected to provide a set of guidelines to NEN to design interventions on the subject from a feminist lens in the future.



Objectives

- To explore the implications of menstrual myths and practices on the overall growth of girls (12-20 years) and document the influence of prevalent myths, taboos, practices, attitudes and behaviours, particularly among young women and girls asserting their rights and agency.
- To document the perception, attitude and behaviour of mothers, community members and educational institutions regarding menstruation and related issues.

Menstruation is a natural biological process experienced by half of the world's population. However, across various cultures and societies, menstruation is often surrounded by myths, stigmas, and taboos that can have significant social, psychological, and even physical consequences upon the menstruating individuals. Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH) as a concept is essential to the well-being and promotion of the agency of women and adolescent girls.

Menstruation relegates a phenomenon not to be discussed in masculine spaces which is repeatedly manifested in a society of patriarchal domination. Period shaming becomes a social conduct obstructing public awareness of the physical process and propagating an imbalance of power and agency in the gendered segregation.

Ground Myths

"When a menstruating woman touches her husband, his lifespan reduces"- FGD, Assam

Assam and its Scenario on Menstruation

Many communities in Assam follow stringent rules and rituals in varied ways during menstruation that restrict total or partial mobility of the menstruating person. Assam is a diverse state comprising different castes, tribes, communities, sub tribes and each one of them follow certain distinctive practices apart from the practices that are followed by all the communities alike. Begun in the days of the past for propagating female menstrual health that requires rest, and reduced physical labour, menstruation eventually turned into a series of discriminatory practices affecting the holistic development of females. It was also used as a tool to control women's sexuality and an announcement to declare that a girl's body is now ready for reproduction and therefore, eligible for marriage, while the latter being one of the many factors of child/early marriage in Assam.

Known by different names like “Suwa”, “Gundho”, “Hadila”, “Nuara”, “Axubidha”, “Adin Edang”, “Dangnu Haya Yadu” in multiple Assamese languages meaning filthy, smelly, untouchable, etc. menstruation, which is a natural and healthy process, is curbed under the heavy foot of cultural dogmatism. Stigma inculcates discrimination in the language of the ordinary which ignites a behaviour of shame that is attached to the process of menstruation. The ostracism branching out of patriarchal and gender-based dominations debars the agency of women in participating as equal members of the society.

Findings

The influence of prevalent myths, taboos, practices, attitudes and behaviours, particularly among young women and girls influence their role in asserting their rights and agency in the society. In contrast to the menstrual hygiene practices, adolescent girls are more aware of the social norms that are associated with menstruation. They gather information from their mothers, women of the household and neighbourhood, classmates and friends. They are either taught or have learnt through personal observation. The celebration and rituals of menarche varies from one community to another. Initially, the people belonging to Rabha and the Bodo community had few or liberal norms to follow during menstruation. But the process of Sanskritisation made them adapt to the norms of the majority caste in the vicinity. In the attempt to blend it, intermix and posit as socially equals with the majority of the population, the tribal communities started following the same rituals and regulations as them. The survey also reveals that most of the menstruating girls refrain from going to school during menstruation following the beliefs around purity and pollution observed in their homes.

Conservatism works with certain biases. When it comes to housekeeping and housework, in certain cases, the rules for menstruating women are limited to tasks and responsibilities that have to be performed within restricted boundaries. The rules keep on changing according to the preference and convenience of the male members of the family, thereby, preserving the agency of the males of the household and disregarding the intention of rest associated with menstruation.

Table 1: Did you have prior information on menstruation before attaining menarche?

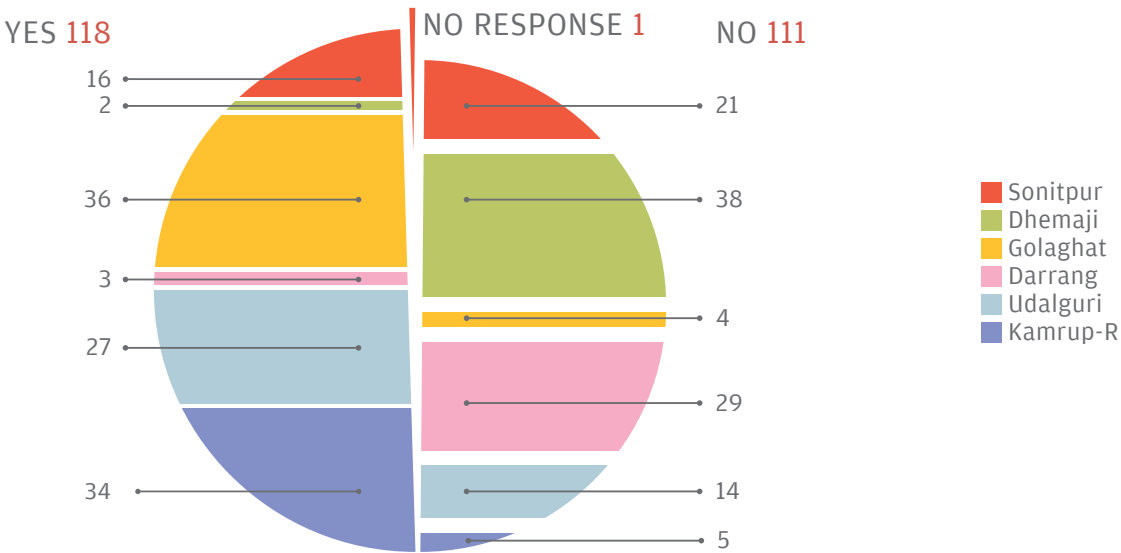


Table 2: What kind of information did you have on menstruation before attaining menarche?

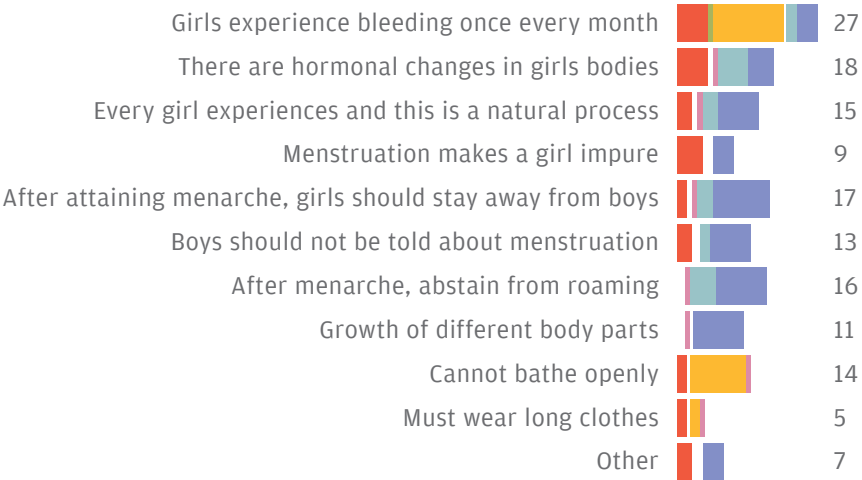
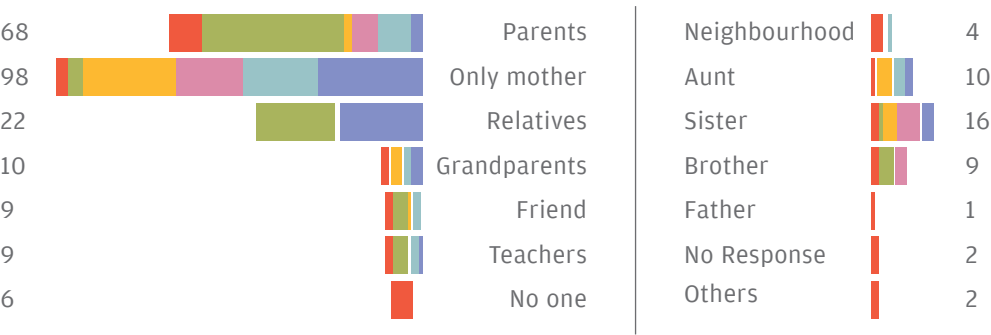


Table 3: After attaining menarche, who was the first person you informed?





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