

Socio-cultural Taboos concerning Menstruation: A Micro Level Study in the Cuddalore District of Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract- Introduction: In general, in each society there are socio-cultural norms and prescriptions regarding the knowledge, attitude, preference, behaviour of people, etc. In Hindu culture, menstruation (a reproductive health element) is considered religiously impure and ceremonially unclean. There are many socio-cultural taboos being practiced by females during menstruation. Apart from validity, these taboos help the women maintain menstrual hygiene as a prerequisite to avoid reproductive health problems. Therefore, this paper attempts to examine such practices in the study area and the factors influencing the practice of social taboos. **Methodology:** This paper is based on the primary data collected from 600 sample respondents from rural and urban areas chosen by using systematic sampling method. The Socio-cultural taboo Index developed is to classify women into three categories as low, moderate and high practice of social taboos. The statistical tool like chi-square test is attempted to test an association between the factors. Results: The results show that a very strong practice attitude among the women is clearly evident in keeping them away from religious and ceremonial participation. Surprisingly, this practice is comparatively high among urban respondents. Except religious and ceremonial related taboos, women do not seem favorable to practice of other social-taboos. Conclusion: At least a strong belief in "Menstruation is religiously impure and ceremonially unclean" makes them practice menstrual hygiene.

I. INTRODUCTION

In general, in every society there are socio-cultural norms and prescriptions about knowledge, preference, attitude, behaviour of various aspects in life. For example, looking at male child as an economic asset to a family motivates couples to go for large family. Similarly, there are some practices of socio-cultural taboos concerning menstruation (S. Puri, S. Kapoor, 2006) The myths and taboos are related to health/disease: postpartum hygiene; protection of the newborn's integrity; menses; alternatives for a solution of health problems; and gender issues, the conducts the women follow to avoid becoming "saucy" being evidenced(Luz Am et al., 2007) When a girl attains puberty, significance is attached to the day of the coming of age. It is the custom to consult a book of omens. The month, the day and the time are noted. If it happens to be a Monday, the girl will be eminently chaste. Tuesday is not favourable, as she is likely to be a widow early in her days of wedlock. If Wednesday, she will be wealthy. Thursday is good, too, for she bids fair to be virtuous. Friday is not considered auspicious. Saturday and Sundays are

also bad days as she runs the risk of being poor. The time, too, has its meaning. Morning is best. After mid-day, not so good. If she happens to wear a white cloth it is lucky. Red cloth, unlucky. If the girl herself first sees the marks, it is considered to be unlucky. These customs seem to be a reflection of the South Indian customs(M.D Ragavan, 2001). In Hindu culture, certain taboos are usually followed. Though some taboos seem to be superstitious, they are useful to maintain menstrual hygiene. For example, once menstruation began she is isolated from participating in day to day activities.(Rita E. Montgomery,2001) First, she should take bath soon after she wakes up from sleep for which there is a separate place where she has to use separate mat for sleep which should be washed every day morning along with the cloths she used. Some taboos being followed are "She shouldn't go to Pooja room", "She should use separate vessels, mate, billow and wash things every day morning during menstruation. She should sleep alone on empty floor. She shouldn't throw out her dress with blood strain. She should not allow the dog to eat the food remaining after her eating. She shouldn't see men and touch flowers before bath. She shouldn't see the Bird during menstruation"(Frank W. Young and Albert A.Bacdayan, 1965) In Hindu religion, menstruation is considered religiously impure and ceremonially unclean , but no scientific reason has been given. One could expect that the practice of such taboos is likely to be more in rural areas as compared to urban areas. Such practices are also observed in other religious communities (Deepu P. Thomas, 2011). Therefore, the primary objective of this paper is to assess the extent to which the respondents practice socio-cultural taboos during menstruation and varying practice due to background differentials and the scope for practicing menstrual hygiene.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper is based on the primary data collected from the rural and urban respondents (both married and unmarried in the reproductive age groups). The sample size fixed is 600 comprising of 245 rural and 355 urban respondents. The systematic sampling method was used to select the respondents. First, the sampling frame consisting of females in unmarried and married categories but in the reproductive age groups separately for rural and urban areas was made. Out of 600 respondents, the number of women to be chosen from rural and urban areas was made on the basis of their proportions in the total listed. The number from unmarried and married categories in rural areas was decided on the basis of their proportions in the total rural women

listed. The similar procedure was adopted in urban also. In rural areas, every 12th in the married and every 16th in unmarried list category was selected. Similarly every 7th and 9th cases in urban areas were chosen. By interview method, a detailed survey schedule as a tool of data collection was administered to collect data from the sample respondents. Before finalizing the survey schedule, the researcher collected through group discussion method some information on socio-cultural taboos existing and being practiced in the study area.

III. SOCIO-CULTURAL TABOO INDEX (SCTI)

An attempt is made to develop an index for measuring socio-cultural taboos being practiced during menstruation by the respondents. There are 15 questions relating to socio-cultural taboos. Each question is dichotomous having two alternative answers as “Yes” or “No” which are given scores “1” and “0” indicating practice and non-practice of socio-cultural taboos respectively. For all the 15 questions, each respondent is to obtain the total score ranging from 0 – 15 which could be arbitrarily classified into three equal categories as low, moderate and high practice of socio-cultural taboos respectively. The respondents are classified into these three categories on the basis of the total score obtained. The questions considered for this purpose and scoring procedure are given in appendix.

IV. MENSTRUAL HYGIENE INDEX (MHI)

Menstrual Hygiene Index was developed to measure the extent to which the respondents (women) maintain menstrual hygiene. Nine questions are considered for developing the index. Almost all the questions are dichotomous in nature (Yes or No type). While the answers relating to maintaining menstrual hygiene are given the score 1, other alternative answer are given

score “0”. For all the questions considered for this index, a respondent can obtain a score ranging from 0-9 which can arbitrarily be classified into three level as Poor (1-3) Moderate (4-6) and Better menstrual hygiene (7-9). The important questions considered and scores given to answers for each question are given in Appendix II. **Statistical tools Used:** The statistical tool like chi-square test is attempted to test an association between socio-cultural taboos and background characteristics.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

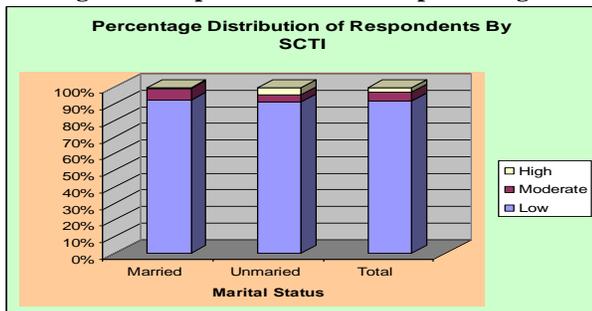
Practice of Socio-cultural Taboos During Menstruation: This section deals with the practice of socio-cultural taboos during menstruation in the study area. Table 1 shows that there were 15 questions pertaining to social taboos asked to the respondents. The number and percentage of those who said “Yes” to the each statement are given in table. Irrespective of residence and marital status, cent percent followed the specific socio-cultural taboo that is “She should not sit on the Areshed”. While about half of the respondents seem to have followed the social taboos such as ‘Shouldn't touch pooja things’, ‘Shouldn't go to temple’, ‘Shouldn't go to pooja room at home’, and ‘She is to avoid the chance a dog eats food remaining after she eats’; there are negligible proportions of cases with regard to the rest of the social taboos mentioned in table. Surprisingly, the practice of the above mentioned taboos was very stronger in urban areas as compared to rural areas where the practice of other taboos was comparatively high. In other words, many of the social taboos being followed by the respondents mainly relate to religious aspects. Therefore, the responses seem reflecting religious perception as menstruation is considered religiously impure and ceremonially unclean.

Table 1: Statements concerning socio-cultural taboos being followed during menstruation

Sl.No	Social Taboos	Rural			Urban		
		Married	Unmarried	Total	Married	Unmarried	Total
1	Shouldn't see men before bathing	-	12 (7.9)	12 (4.8)	2 (0.9)	3 (2.0)	5 (0.8)
2	Shouldn't see the Bird before bathing	-	11 (6.9)	11 (4.4)	2 (0.9)	2 (0.6)	4 (1.1)
3	Shouldn't sit on the Areshed	87 (100.0)	158 (100.0)	245 (100.0)	205 (100.0)	150 (100.0)	355 (100.0)
4	Shouldn't touch cooked foods,	7 (8.0)	22 (13.9)	29 (11.8)	22 (10.7)	4 (2.6)	26 (7.3)
5	Shouldn't touch plants,	-	10 (6.3)	10 (4.0)	8 (3.9)	3 (2.0)	11 (3.0)
6	Shouldn't touch pooja things	46 (52.8)	91 (57.5)	137 (55.9)	170 (82.9)	136 (90.6)	306 (86.1)
7	Shouldn't touch flowers	-	12(7.5)	12(4.8)	12(5.8)	4 (2.6)	16(4.5)
8	She shouldn't touch infants	-	12 (7.5)	12 (4.8)	13 (6.3)	4 (2.6)	17 (4.7)

9	She is to avoid the chance a dog eats food remaining after she eats	46 (52.8)	91 (57.5)	137 (55.9)	41 (20.0)	105 (70.0)	146 (41.1)
10	Shouldn't go to temple	46 (52.8)	91 (57.5)	137 (55.9)	177 (86.3)	136 (90.6)	313 (88.1)
11	Shouldn't go to pooja room at home	46 (52.8)	91 (57.5)	137 (55.9)	176 (85.8)	136 (90.6)	313 (88.1)
12	Should use empty floor or mat for sleep	-	1 (0.6)	1 (0.4)	2 (0.9)	3 (2.0)	5 (0.8)
13	Should use separate vessels,	-	11 (6.9)	11 (4.4)	-	3 (20.)	3 (0.8)
14	Should use separate mat and be washed every day	-	12 (7.9)	12 (4.8)	2 (0.9)	4 (2.6)	6 (1.6)
15	She has to take with her neem twig while going out	-	11 (6.9)	11 (4.4)	2 (0.9)	4 (2.6)	6 (1.6)
	Total	87 (100.0)	158(100.0)	245 (100.0)	205 (100.0)	150 (100.0)	355 (100.0)

Figure 1: In parentheses denote percentages



The role of background conditions in practice of socio-cultural taboos: An attempt is made to analyse the role of background variables in practice of the specific socio-cultural taboos practiced by majority of respondents from rural and urban

areas. It is clearly evident from forth going analysis that irrespective of marital status and residence, majority of respondents followed religious and ceremonial related social taboos when compared to other taboos mentioned. Therefore, the practice of these taboos is classified with socio-economic background of the respondents. Out of total respondents in each category of a variable, the percentage said “yes” towards practice of social taboos is taken into account. Table 2 shows that the practice of social taboos is comparatively high among the urban respondents, Hindus, the respondents belonging to non-schedule caste and joint families. There is no observable difference with regard to educational attainment and occupational status of women. These observations have been statistically proved with help of chi square results. Therefore, it seems that socio-economic improvement is not so favourable to give up the practice of socio-cultural taboos during menstruation.

Table 2: Practice of Select Socio-cultural taboos cross classified by Background conditions of Respondents.

Select Background conditions	Religious Related Taboos				
	Should not sit on the Areshed	Should not touch pooja things	Should avoid the chance a dog eats food residual left over menstruating women. .	Should not go to the temple	Should not go to pooja room (at home)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Residence	*	*	*	*	*
Rural (245)	245(100.0)	137(55.9)	137(55.9)	137(55.9)	137(55.9)
Urban (355)	354(99.7)	306(86.1)	146(41.1)	313(88.1)	312(87.8)

Marital status	*	*			
Married (292)	291(99.6)	216(73.9)	87(29.7)	223(76.3)	222(76.0)
Unmarried (308)	308 (100.0)	227 (73.7)	196(63.6)	227(73.7)	227(73.7)
Religion		*	*	*	*
Hindu (469)	468 (99.7)	441(94.0)	282(60.1)	447(95.3)	447(95.3)
Christian (125)	125 (100.0)	1 (0.8)	1 (0.8)	2 (1.6)	2 (1.6)
Muslim (6)	6 (100.0)	1 (16.6)	-	1 (16.6)	-
Caste		*	**	*	*
SC/ST (277)	227 (810.9)	162(58.4)	131(47.2)	163(58.8)	163(58.8)
MBC (266)	266 (100.0)	230 (86.4)	117(43.9)	233(87.5)	233(87.5)
BC (50)	49(98.0)	47(94.0)	32(64.0)	50(100.0)	50(100.0)
OC/FC (7)	7 (100.0)	4(57.1)	3(42.8)	4(57.1)	3(42.8)
Family type		**	*	**	
Joint (260)	259(99.6)	201(77.3)	78(30.0)	204(78.4)	203(78.0)
Nuclear (340)	340(100.0)	242(71.7)	205(60.2)	246(72.3)	246(72.3)
Literacy and Educational level		**	*	**	
Illiterate (18)	18(100.0)	16(88.8)	3(16.6)	16(88.8)	16(88.8)
Middle school (126)	125(99.2)	108(85.7)	32(25.3)	108(85.7)	108(85.7)
High school (225)	225(100.0)	132(58.6)	117(52.0)	133(59.1)	133(59.1)
Higher Secondary (201)	201(100.0)	161(80.0)	121(60.1)	165(82.0)	164(81.5)
Diploma (27)	27(100.0)	24(88.8)	9(33.3)	25(92.5)	25(92.5)
Degree (3)	3(100.0)	2(66.6)	1(33.3)	3(100.0)	3(100.0)
Occupation		**	*	**	**
Student (330)	330(100.0)	246(74.5)	201(60.9)	246(74.5)	246(74.5)
Cooly (6)	6(100.0)	6(100.0)	3(50.0)	6(100.0)	6(100.0)
Housewife (251)	250(99.6)	180(71.7)	79(31.4)	187(74.5)	186(74.1)
Petty sales (11)	11(100.0)	11(100.0)	-	11(100.0)	11(100.0)
Unemployed (2)	2(100.0)	-	-	-	-

*Significant at 5 percent level. **Significant at 1 percent level.

Socio-cultural Taboo Index (SCTI):An attempt is made to develop an index for measuring socio-cultural taboos being practiced during menstruation by the respondents. There are 15 questions or statements. Each question or statement has an alternative answer ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ which are given scores ‘1’ and ‘0’ indicating practice and non-practice of socio-cultural taboos

respectively. For all the questions, each respondent is to obtain the total score ranging from 0 – 15 which could be arbitrarily classified into three equal categories as low, moderate and high practice of socio-cultural taboos respectively. The respondents are classified into these three categories on the basis of the total score obtained.

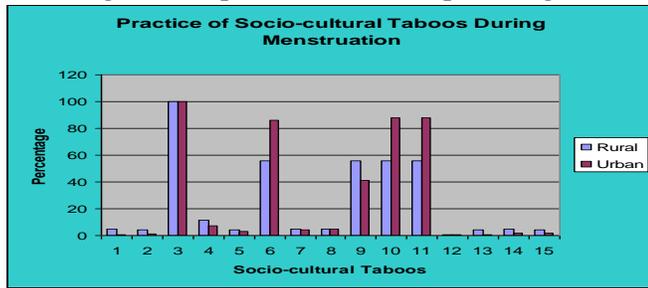
Table 3: Distribution of respondents By SCTI

Marital Status	Low	Moderate	High	Total	Average Score
Married	270(92.5)	20(6.8)	2(0.7)	292(100)	3.8
Unmarried	281(91.2)	13(4.2)	14(4.5)	308(100)	4.3
Total	551(91.83)	33(5.5)	16(2.67)	600(100)	4.06

Table 3 shows that according to socio-cultural Taboos Index, overwhelming majority in each of the marital status categories had low practice of socio-cultural taboos during menstruation and the proportion with high practice of social taboos was comparatively high in unmarried category. The

average score referring to the practice of socio-cultural taboos during menstruation is comparatively high for unmarried women.

Figure 2: In parentheses denote percentages.



Socio-cultural taboos Index cross classified with Background conditions of women: An attempt is made to cross classify the socio-cultural Taboos Index with the background conditions of women so as to assess the influence of socio-

economic variables on the practice of social taboos during menstruation. It is evident from table 4 that majority of women fall in the low practice category with respect to each of the socio-economic factors. While analyzing the proportions with high practice in each variable categories, rural and unmarried women, Hindus and women belonging to B.C and F.C, living in nuclear families and having higher secondary education constitute comparatively high proportions. Though there is an association between the high level of practice and the low socio-economic strata, in respect of the two socio-cultural factors (religion and caste), Hindu women and the women belonging to B.C and F.C (Top in social hierarchy) highly practice socio-cultural taboos. The average index scores vary to some extent with socio-economic background conditions of women.

Table 4: Socio-Cultural Taboos Index is cross-classified with Background Conditions of Women

Background Variables	Variable categories	Low	Moderate	High	Average Score
Residence	Rural	222(90.6)	11(4.5)	12(4.9)	3.7
	Urban	329(92.7)	22(6.2)	4(1.1)	4.3
Marital Status	Married	270(92.5)	20(6.8)	2(0.7)	3.8
	Unmarried	281(91.2)	13(4.2)	14(4.5)	4.3
Religion	Hindu	421(89.8)	32(6.8)	16(3.4)	4.8
	Christians	124(99.2)	1(0.8)	-	1.2
	Muslims	6(100.0)	-	-	1.3
Caste	SC	269(97.1)	8(2.9)	-	3.2
	MBC	261(98.1)	5(1.9)	-	4.0
	BC	16(32.0)	20(40.0)	14(28.0)	8.0
	FC/ OC	5(71.4)	-	2(28.6)	6.1
Family Type	Joint	239(91.9)	17(6.5)	4(1.5)	3.9
	Nuclear	312(91.8)	16(4.7)	12(3.5)	4.1
Literacy and Edn. Attainment	Illiterate	17(94.4)	1(5.6)	-	3.9
	Middle School	121(96.0)	5(4.0)	-	3.9
	High School	211(93.8)	9(4.0)	5(2.2)	3.5
	Higher Sec.	173(86.1)	17(8.5)	11(5.5)	4.7
	Diploma	26(96.3)	1(3.7)	-	4.2
	Degree	3(100.0)	-	-	4.0
Occupation	Cooly	6(100.0)	-	-	4.5
	Housewife	231(92.0)	18(7.2)	2(0.8)	3.7
	Petty Sales	10(90.9)	1(9.1)	-	4.1
	Student	302(91.5)	14(4.2)	14(4.2)	4.3
	Unemployed	2(100.0)	-	-	1.0
Income	<=5000	487(92.2)	26(4.9)	15(2.8)	3.9
	5001-10000	34(89.5)	3(7.9)	1(2.6)	4.8
	10001-15000	14(93.3)	1(6.7)	-	4.3
	>=20000	16(84.2)	3(15.8)	-	4.9

Figure 3: within brackets denote percentages: Average SCTI Scores for Selected Variables' Categories

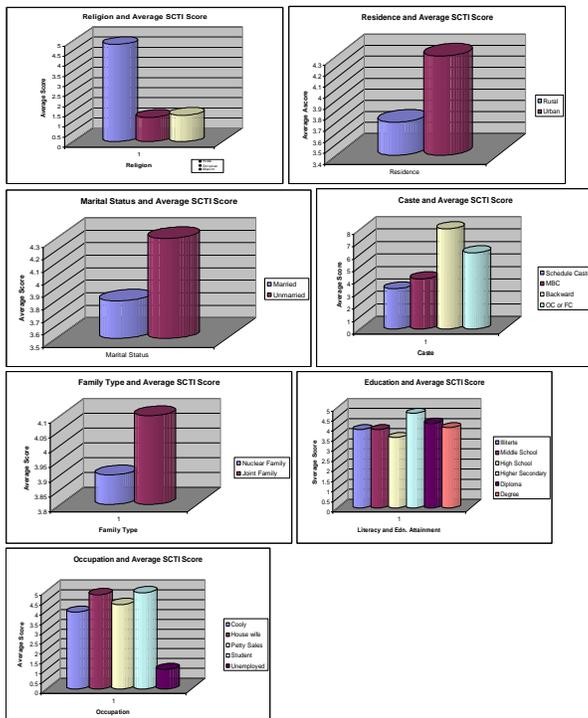
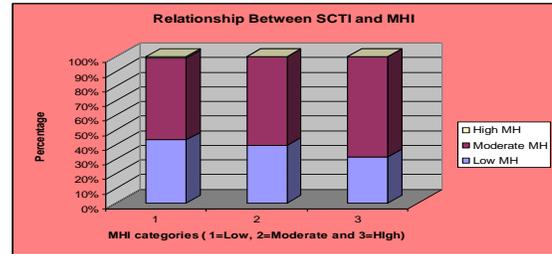


Figure 4: Chi-square result (1.302 with p value of 0.861) indicates no significant association between SCTI and MHI.



VI. CONCLUSION

An attempt was made to study the practice of socio-cultural taboos relating to menstruation, examine the factors responsible for practice and its role on menstrual hygiene practice. Though the practice was not so strong among the respondents in the study area, the practice of such taboos in view of maintaining or keeping religious purity draws attention. Surprisingly, the practice was more noticeable among the respondents at higher socio-economic scale. The socio-cultural taboos Index indicates that majority of respondents are either in low or moderate practice category and the average index score is comparatively high for the respondents in the categories of unmarried status, urban areas, Hindus, joint family structure, and high school level of education. The practice confirms Hindu belief that menstruation is religiously impure and ceremonially unclean. It seems that the taboos other than the above mentioned are slightly disappearing from practice among the respondents. Though there is a weak linkage statistically between the practice of socio-cultural taboos and maintenance of menstrual hygiene, the belief that menstruation is religiously impure and ceremonially unclean itself implies the scope for practice of menstrual hygiene.

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Cross classification of SCTI with MHI: At least the culture-based restriction of not doing anything before taking path during menstruation makes the women to be hygienic during menstruation.. Therefore, these taboos are to some extent useful for hygienic life style which could be welcome factor. An attempt is made to examine an association between menstrual hygiene and practice of socio-cultural taboos. Table 5 shows that Menstrual Hygiene Index is cross classified with Socio-cultural Taboos Index. Of those who have low practice of socio-cultural taboos, the major proportions are in the low and medium menstrual hygiene categories. In case of practice of medium social taboos category, majority is in medium menstrual hygiene practice category, but in the category of the practice of high social taboos (very less numbers in this category may not help to infer meaningfully) majority of women are found in medium menstrual hygiene. In conclusion, it seems that there is some association, but not a perfect or s strong association between practice of socio-cultural taboos and menstrual hygiene management. Also the chi-square test has not shown any significant association between the two indices.

Table 5 : SCTI is cross-classified with with MHI

SCTI	Menstrual Hygiene Index			Total
	Low	Moderate	High	
Low	241(43.7)	309(56.0)	1(0.1)	551(100.0)
Medium	13(39.3)	20(60.0)	-	33(100.0)
High	5(31.5)	11(68.7)	-	16(100.0)
Total	259(100.0)	340(100.0)	1(100.0)	600

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Appendix: I

The questions considered for development of Socio-cultural Taboos Index and scoring procedure are given below. **Variables considered and Scoring Procedure**

Sl.No.	Statements relating to social taboos	Scoring Procedure	
1	She shouldn't see men before bathing	Yes = 1	No = 0
2	She shouldn't see the Bird before bathing	Yes = 1	No = 0
3	She shouldn't sit on the Areshed	Yes = 1	No = 0
4	She shouldn't touch cooked foods,	Yes = 1	No = 0
5	She shouldn't touch plants,	Yes = 1	No = 0
6	She shouldn't touch pooja things	Yes = 1	No = 0
7	She shouldn't touch flowers	Yes = 1	No = 0
8	She shouldn't touch infants	Yes = 1	No = 0
9	She is to avoid the chance a dog eats food remaining after she eats.	Yes = 1	No = 0
10	She shouldn't go to temple	Yes = 1	No = 0
11	She shouldn't go to pooja room at home	Yes = 1	No = 0
12	She should use empty floor or mat for sleep	Yes = 1	No = 0
13	She should use separate vessels,	Yes = 1	No = 0
14	She should use separate mat and be washed every day	Yes = 1	No = 0
15	She has to take with her neem twig while going out	Yes = 1	No = 0

Appendix: II

The questions and the detail of the scoring procedure for developing Menstrual Hygiene Index are given.

Sl.No.	Menstrual Hygienic practice	Scoring Procedure	
1	Clean reproductive organ every day	Yes = 1	No = 0
2	Removed public hair	Yes = 1	No = 0
3	Used washable cloths	Yes = 1	No = 0
4	Giving importance to cleanliness	Yes = 1	No = 0
5	Take bath daily	Yes = 1	No = 0
6	Do you have experienced odor	Yes = 1	No = 0
7	Use of cloth or nappy pad to absorb menses	Yes = 1	No = 0
8	Having bath room/ toilet facilities	Yes = 1	No = 0
9	Problems in storing and disposing the use materials	Yes = 1	No = 0