

The lived experience of the onset of menarche and menstruation amongst adolescent girls in urban townships of Gqeberha, Eastern Cape Province in South Africa

Mona. N¹ and Professor Voce. A.S¹

1. School of Nursing and Public Health, College of Health Sciences University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Abstract

Background: Onset of menarche is a crucial marker of adolescent girls' rite of passage to womanhood. Menarche and menstruation are experienced differently among adolescent girls within and across cultures in developing and developed countries. Menstrual Health it is an integral part of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. Various dynamics contribute to the overall experience of menarche and menstruation among adolescent girls. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of menarche and menstruation among adolescent girls, with an emphasis on experiences of menstrual stigma. **Aim:** To explore the lived experience of onset of menarche and menstruation among adolescent girls who live in the urban townships of Gqeberha in the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. **Objectives:** To explore preparedness for the onset of menarche among adolescent girls; to explore perceptions of menarche and menstruation among adolescent girls, boys and caregivers; and to explore experiences related to menarche and menstruation. These dimensions shape and contribute to the lived experience of onset of menarche and menstruation of adolescent girls. This study adopted a critical feminist paradigm as the philosophical underpinning of the study, analysing the role of power structures within heteronormative and patriarchal societies dominated by hegemonic masculinities, and their influence on the lived experience of menarche and menstruation by adolescent girls. **Research methods and design:** A qualitative research design was applied using Individual In-depth Interviews (IDIs) and six Focus Group Discussions were conducted with adolescents aged 10-19 in urban townships of Gqeberha in the Eastern Cape. Maximum variation purposive sampling technique and maximum variation criteria guided the sampling of the study participants. The sample size was guided by code and meaning saturation which concluded to 31 Individual IDIs. The IDIs were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to iterative thematic analysis, applying both deductive and inductive analysis. **Results:** The findings of this study showed that the conceptualization of lived experience of menarche vary across adolescents, such lived experiences are characterized by whether the adolescent girl had knowledge, awareness understanding about menstruation prior onset of menarche, well-equipped with resources to manage one's menses healthily, safely and with dignity. Furthermore, the findings showed that limited knowledge or awareness results in the lack of preparedness for onset of menarche yields to experiences of anxiety, embarrassment, shame, afraidness, loss of self-worth and confidence. Particularly when one experience menstrual leakage, they are subjected to period teasing and bullying, label and in overall menstrual stigma through the stereotypes and use of euphemism perpetuated by male counterparts. The menstrual societal beliefs and taboos perpetuated by adolescent boys, men and elderly male counterpart shape how adolescent perceive menarche, menstruation, and the role of woman in the society. Onset of menarche is merely subjected to sexual maturity, development of breasts, bums and hips in which boys and men regard as being sexually matured. On the other hand, menstrual blood is associated with the smell of pilchard, fish, dead rat, red robot, red carpet, being dirty and unclean among others which devalue menstruating adolescent girls. Furthermore, adolescent boys have labelled menstruating girls into

wearing a 'pampers', 'napkin' when referring to sanitary pads, and to a certain extent question how girls can bleed for seven days and do not die, referring to menstruating girls to being dirty. Furthermore, on the onset of menarche adolescent girls are subjected to the societal beliefs on onset of menarche such as behavioral regulation, gender socialization restrictions, and menarche being associated with maturity, early sexual debut and risky of exposure to early child being thus intake of contraceptives is enforced on adolescent girls. Moreover, menstruating adolescent girls subjected to sociocultural beliefs and social practices some yielding to positive or negative outcomes. In overall menarche and menstruation are subjected to the culture of silence and shaping the lived experiences of adolescent girls. Thus, it is imperative to incorporation of Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH) education within the mainstream school curriculum, engaging both female and male adolescents to deconstruct stereotypes and the menstrual stigma that male adolescents impose upon female counterparts, thereby facilitating the desensitization of menstruation. Furthermore, it is imperative that caregivers and parents receive pertinent MHH awareness and education to mitigate the prevalence of menstrual illiteracy, thereby fostering constructive interactions between parents and adolescents regarding menstrual health as well as sexual and reproductive health. In overall uprooted the social norms and beliefs and menstrual stigma surrounding menstruation. Conclusion and recommendations: The findings of this study suggest that in order to address the unmet need of healthy and safe experience of menarche and menstruation among adolescent girls it crucial to disentangle patriarchal beliefs, norms and taboos associated with menstrual. It is not enough to unpack the existing and underlying power dynamics and gendered stigma translated in menstrual stigma. It is pivotal to question these power structures that have subjected menstruation in the culture of silence, and which have sexualized menstruation. The findings of this study indicate that there is an urgency in changing the social attitudes, behaviors and harmful beliefs that have labelled menstruating individuals. Furthermore, the findings of this study showed that it is imperative to engage with girls, women, boys and men pertaining to menstrual health education and awareness and sexual reproductive health (SRH). In alignment with that the findings of this study indicate that there is need for menstrual health and hygiene education to be fully integrated within the school curriculum engaging with female and male adolescents to dismantle stereotypes and menstrual stigma that male adolescents perpetuate towards female adolescents and to desensitize menstruation. Moreover, caregivers and parents also need menstrual health and hygiene awareness and education to reduce the level of menstrual illiteracy to promote positive parental and adolescent engagement on menstrual health and sexual and reproductive health. It is pivotal to address the unmet needs of menstrual health and hygiene and menstrual health in alignment with SDGs vision 2030 and Africa agenda 2063 to meet the unmet needs of adolescent menstruators to create a positive and sustainable livelihood in the principle of living no one behind. The adolescent girls call the need for the community health workers to educate the society.

Key word: Onset of menarche, menstruation, menstrual stigma, adolescence