

Cultural regulation of female sexuality through marriage and motherhood

Dr. Irengbam Bijeta Devi¹ & Prof. M C Arunkumar²

¹Phd, Dept. of Anthropology, Manipur University, Canchipur, Imphal- 795003, India.

²Head of Department, Dept. of Anthropology, Manipur University, Canchipur, Imphal- 795003, India.

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the cultural regulation of female sexuality after menarche in three Muslim localities of Manipur. The regulation of sexuality is considered necessary in order to preserve an adolescent girl's chastity and morality. After marriage, marital sexuality is limited to childbearing in order to enhance a woman's status within the family and society. 68 Muslim adolescent girls in the three localities conform to the cultural norms of sexuality by entering into early marriage and motherhood. The mean age at marriage for women of all age group is also low as compared men showing that women often succumb to the cultural norms on sexuality after menarche. It often leads to the degradation of their health and well being amidst poor socio-economic conditions.

Keywords: marriage, childbearing, adolescent, sexuality

Introduction

Cultural regulation of female sexuality is prevalent in many societies. Society often prescribes "ideal" and "deviant" models of women in accordance with the cultural and religious ideals. According to Bennett (2005), a girl's identity after puberty is based on her understandings of ideal and normative femininity, and how she embodies these to regulate their own and others' behavior. There is cultural and religious insistence on the confinement of female sexuality within marriage, and the denial of female desire independent of the desire for children. Good women are mothers who confine their sexuality to marriage with the primary intention of child bearing. Good women are also chaste, obedient daughters who closely guard their modesty and virginity during maidenhood. Bad women engage in sex for pleasure and sex outside marriage; they act as temptresses inciting male desire (Bennett, 2005). Arunkumar (1992) presents two parallel traditions of woman's behavior in Meitei women of Manipur, India. According to him, the ideal pattern in the patri-oriented Meitei social system is shaped after the *Imoinu* model. *Imoinu* is the goddess of wealth in Meitei religion. She is taken as the ideal referent image of Manipuri women. The *Imoinu* model encourages women to surrender to their husbands, look after their children, be merciful by the standards of the tradition, possess patience and abandon one self. Another tradition that runs parallel to the *Imoinu* model is the *Panthoibi* model. *Panthoibi* is the chief female deity in the non-Hindu Meitei world. She represents the self-esteemed, ego centric and feminine pride possessed personality that negates the patri-oriented norms. The women in this line like to project their personalities and are pictured as having self-confidence over their strength of mind and will. She acts against the concept of modesty that prevailed in the society by engaging in deviant behaviors.

The basic purpose of prescribing such ideal and deviant female behaviors is to regulate female sexuality according to the cultural norms of that particular society. A woman is expected to conform to the idealized female body which is an embodiment of cultural ideals and norms. Society attempts to control woman's body by generating the fear of stigma and exclusion based on the deviant and despicable female models. Amidst cultural regulation of women's body, marriage and motherhood becomes the innate response to the satisfaction of women's multifarious desires in both religious and cultural terms (Bennett, 2005). This study aims to explore the cultural regulation of female sexuality in three Muslim localities of Manipur and how Muslim adolescent girls conform to it by entering into early marriage and motherhood after menarche.

Research methodology

Three Muslim localities in Manipur are chosen as field sites for this research. Minuthong, Hatta Golapati in Imphal East district is chosen as the urban locality as it is the most important and prominent Muslim urban areas in Manipur. Kwakta, which is one of the most important Muslim localities in Bishnupur district, is chosen as the rural field site. Tarahei, located in Hiyangthang, Imphal West District, is selected as sub-urban field site. This site is selected as it is one of the few Muslim villages located in the rural-urban

transition zone of Manipur. Purposive sampling is used in this study and data has been collected via household census, questionnaire, semi-structured and in-depth interview, Focus Group Discussion and non-participant observation method. There are 22 married adolescent girls in Golapati, 40 in Kwakta and 6 in Tarahei. A mixed questionnaire with both open ended and closed ended questions is employed to them. Interview of the 68 married adolescent girls along with 16 married women above the age of 18, Moulvis, community leaders and social workers are conducted. Focus group discussions with married adolescent girls and with married women of age group of 24-65 are also conducted. The data has been analyzed using Microsoft excel and grounded theory.

Results and discussion

Chastity and modesty is held in high esteem in the three localities. A girl is expected to cover her 'awra' as soon as she attains menarche. *Awra* is the Islamic vocabulary for the part of a woman's body that arouses man sexually. Every part of a woman's body including her face is considered as *awra* in their society. Religious leaders and older members of the community expressed their support for Purdah system to cover the *awra* of girls after they become *balik phaba*. A girl is considered as *balik phaba* or *meeoi suba* (complete human being) when she attains menarche. It is an important demarcation point between her carefree childhood stage and the abrupt transition to an adult *leishabi* (maiden/full grown woman) bounded by restrictions.

A girl who has attained menarche has to face the cultural realities that pertain to the regulation of female body. She is expected to become more religious and adopt modesty in her words, behavior and physical appearance. Her chastity and modesty is considered to be at stake due to her matured reproductive organs after *balik phaba*. Thereafter, various codes of conducts are introduced to guide her social interaction especially with the opposite sex. It is traditionally believed that having a husband would ensure her morality as he would satisfy all her basic needs, including sexual needs. Such cultural regulation of sexuality after menarche is reflected in the following statement by a Moulvi who says:

"A woman's body is a very powerful source of temptation for men. We are attracted only to things that we can see. That is why a woman should follow Purdah system as given in our Islamic law. Moreover, once a girl becomes *balik phaba*, she should get married to keep her chastity and morality intact".

The statement of the Moulvi reflects the importance of covering a woman's body and of having a husband after menarche in order to preserve her chastity and morality. It reveals the importance of regulating a girl's sexuality after menarche in their society. In order to control an adolescent girl's sexuality, "ideal" and "deviant" female behaviors are culturally prescribed after *balik phaba*. A girl's identity is based on her conformation to the ideal and deviant behaviors laid down by the society. The ideal female model is based on a woman's chastity, modesty and reproductive function. Since it is traditionally believed that becoming *balik phaba* can tempt a girl into losing her chastity and morality due to her matured reproductive organs, early marriage is traditionally favored. The sexual and reproductive function is to be performed within the boundaries of marriage.

The phenomenon of early marriage is closely linked with the cultural regulation of female sexuality after menarche especially when combined with factors like lack of awareness, low educational and economic level. As evident from table 1, the mean age at marriage for women of all age group is low in the three localities. It is lowest in Kwakta with the mean age at marriage of 16.9 followed by Golapati at 17.5. Tarahei have the highest mean age at marriage for females which is 20.7. It shows that majority of the women had an early marriage after menarche. Age at marriage is higher for male population compared to women. The mean age at marriage for males is highest in Tarahei at 26.7 followed by Golapati at 24.9 and Kwakta at 22.3. It shows that contrary to women, men marry at a later stage after adolescence as there is no pressure to get married after puberty among boys.

Table 1 Mean age at marriage of males and females of all age group

Sex	Golapati (years)	Tarahei (years)	Kwakta (years)
Males	24.5	26.7	22.3
Females	17.5	20.7	16.9

Among the married adolescent girls, the mean age at marriage is 14.9 in Kwakta followed by 16.3 in Golapati and 17.2 at Tarahei showing that all of them married a couple of years after becoming *balik phaba*.

It is worth mentioning that many of the community leaders and some of the Moulvis do not favor early marriage in the present context due to the hardships it can entail to a young adolescent girl. The

number of unmarried adolescent girls also exceeds that of the married adolescent girls showing a decrease in the trend of early marriage.

Another important dimension in the cultural regulation of sexuality is the consideration of reproduction as the goal of marital sexuality. Marital sexuality is limited to childbearing and use of birth control is discouraged. *Chabok phaba nupi* (a woman who can bear many/desired number of children easily) is valued in their society. An infertile woman is looked down upon in their society and is considered defective or useless who usually get *talaq* (divorce) from her husband. Influenced by these cultural ideals, fertility is the most important attribute of the ideal body type for the married adolescent girls. Childbearing is considered necessary for strong marital bond. The significance, however, does not end there.

In their narrations, the married adolescent girls occupy a lower status in their society and family due to their young age. On the other hand, older married women with children are considered to have certain power and freedom within the family and community. This power mainly derives from their ability in continuing their husband's lineage on account of their fertility. Due to such cultural values prescribed to childbearing and the advantages that come along with it, the married adolescent girls also aspire for early childbearing. They consider childbearing as a means to increase their social status and familial life amidst poor socio-economic condition. They are mostly school drop-outs whose happiness and hopes depend on having a happy family with strong marital bond. Only childbearing can give them a positive body image, a strong marital bond, elevate their status in the society and give them autonomy in the family. This benefit of childbearing in their familial and social life outweighs the health risk associated with it. Expectations of such benefits make them follow the cultural ideal of childbearing. A social worker explains the importance of fertility in their society:

"Macha poktaba (infertility) and *nupa poktaba* (inability to bear male child) is one of the main reasons for *talaq* (divorce) in our area. A barren woman is looked down upon in our society. There is a beautiful girl in our neighborhood who is just 14 years old but whose body appears matured, like that of a woman of 20s. Due to her physical beauty, she eloped quite early and got married to her lover. However, she separated from her husband after a year and has to come back to her natal place as she could not conceive soon after marriage".

The statement of the social worker reveals the inner meaning of woman's ability in the society. Physical attractiveness of a married woman is of no value if she could not perform the duty of giving birth. Sooner the pregnancy, a young married woman earns more value in the family and society. What is important is the reproductive ability of her body. It can ensure a strong marital bond. The physical maturity and attractiveness of a young girl might be appealing to many men. The attractiveness of a body vanishes if it does not give yields.

In the present study, out of the 68 married adolescent girls, more than half (67.6%, n=46) of them already have children and 29.4% (n=20) of them have two or more children. It shows their desire for early and frequent childbearing which is a reflection of their cultural ideal on marital sexuality. 19 year old M narrates her experience with frequent childbearing after marriage and how it affected her health. She says,

"I got married when I was fourteen years old. I became pregnant right after marriage. My first child died from unknown causes when he was only two months old. We could not take him to a hospital due to financial constraints and transportation problem. Four months later, I became pregnant again. My second child is now eighteen months old. I recently gave birth to my third child about a month back. It's like, I have been continuously getting pregnant and giving birth for the past five years, non-stop! It took a toll on my health. Look at me! I look very unhealthy. I weigh less than forty kg. My skin is already ageing. I am tired most of the time and I am *ee watpa* (lack of blood). You know, I used to be quite beautiful..."

Due to the cultural values assigned to childbearing after marriage and the desire of the adolescent girls to meet this cultural ideal, they undergo frequent childbearing with less spacing amidst poor socio-economic condition. It is the most important reason for the degradation of their health after childbearing, exposing them to the risk of maternal and neonatal morbidity. Older married women in the three localities also echoed that frequent childbearing with less spacing amidst poor socio-economic condition is detrimental to a woman's health.

Conclusion

Balik phaba or menarche is an important life event for an adolescent girl in the three localities. A girl who has attained menarche has to face the cultural realities that pertain to the regulation of female sexuality. It is closely linked with the phenomenon of early marriage and childbearing. Adolescent girls who

enter into early marriage embody their cultural model of ideal female body. After marriage, they succumb to the cultural ideal of early childbearing. It often leads to the degradation of their health and well being.

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