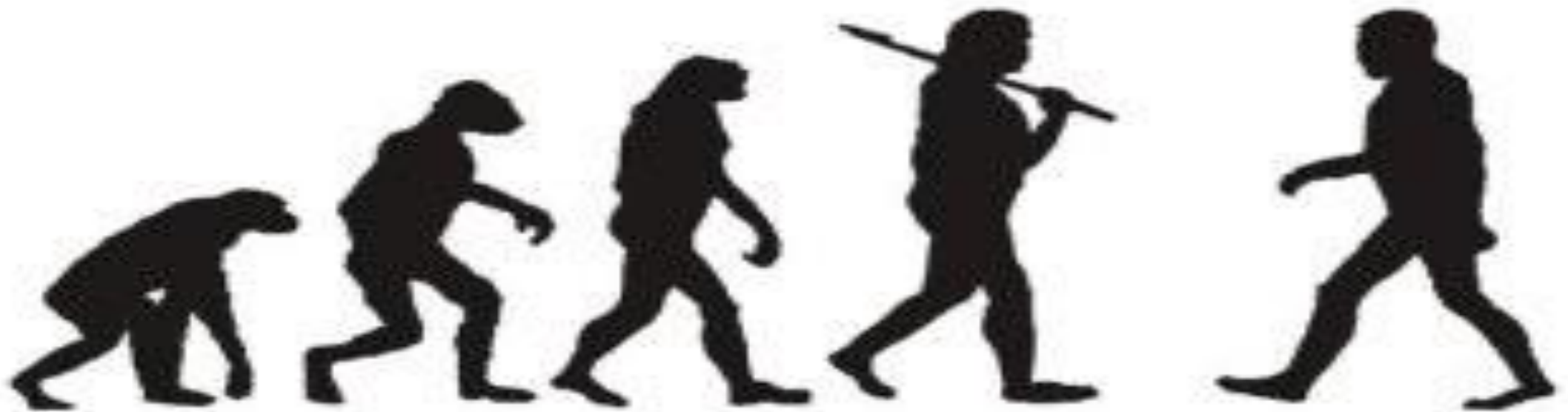


**“How can we leave the norms of  
our father and forefathers?” –  
Exploring Pervasive Socio-cultural  
Understandings of Menstrual  
Hygiene Management Practises in  
Pakistan**

**Z. Mumtaz, P. Sivananthajothy, A. Bhatti, M. Sommer**



Go Back, We Screwed Up.



# MENARCHE

- Onset of Menstruation
- Part of complex physical changes
- Leading girls' transition from childhood to young adulthood.

**A physiologically normal process, in many countries like Pakistan, it is embedded within a host of socio-cultural beliefs, values and practices.**

# Literature

- For girls in particular, the onset of menstruation not only marks the beginning of reproductive age, but also the imposition of strict restrictions (Prasanna, 2016; Bott, 2003).
- In Pakistan, boys gained autonomy, freedom of movement, access to opportunity and patriarchal power, while girls experienced increased enforcement of seclusion, which included segregation from boys, modest dressing and restrictions on their mobility (Bott, 2003; Rennik, 2004; Mumtaz and Raouf 1996, Khan 1998).
- The restrictions on girls are strongly enforced for preservation of girls chastity was equated with the family's izzat (honour) (Rennink, 2004).
- A cross-sectional study of menstrual hygiene practices among pregnant women in Hyderabad, Pakistan found over 70.4% of respondents used washed plain cloth to absorb flow, 16.3% used unwashed plain cloth, while only 10.4% reported using commercial pads or tampons (Ali, 2006).
- 38% of respondents washed and stored these pads in unclean places like under the kitchen roof, under the bed or cushions, behind the door or in the washroom (Mumtaz, 2016).
- Altered bathing practices were also found in some studies (Ali, 2006; Ali 2010).

# Research Study

- A qualitative study was conducted in the provinces of Punjab, Baluchistan and Sindh between February 2015 and March 2017.

## **Objectives of Study :**

- Girls' experiences of menarche
- Girls menstruation related knowledge needs
- How water, sanitation and disposal infrastructure may impact girl's MHM in schools
- Incorporation of findings in the Pakistan Girls Puberty book

# Methods

## Comparative case study

### Participatory Activities: (n= 304)

- In school girls
- Out of school girls  
(Aged 16-19 years)



### Observations:

- School water
- Sanitation
- Disposal facilities



### In-depth Interviews: (n=65)

- Parents
- Teachers
- Health workers
- School Administration



# Themes

## ➤ *Traditional Menstrual Hygiene Management Practises*

- *Poor quality, poorly maintained gender insensitive WASH infrastructure*
- *Unhygienic menstrual management practices that included avoidance of water, and use of rag-pads*
- *Environmentally unfriendly disposal practices*

## ➤ *Underlying beliefs of Traditional Menstrual Hygiene Management Practices*

- *Hot-cold humoural belief system*
- *Menstruation as impure and dirty*
- *Secrecy, Silence and Purdah*
- *Fear of Black Magic*



# **Poor quality, poorly maintained gender insensitive WASH infrastructure**

- ratio of 1 toilet for 303 girls
- Toilets were located in isolated areas of the school, often near school boundary walls behind the main school building
- Toilets were observed extremely dirty, and unhygienic across all six field-sites. A key reason for the dirty washrooms was a lack of cleaners designated to clean the toilets (and schools).
- All Toilets lacked privacy and security. There were no locks and bolts to secure the door from inside.
- Pakistan's caste system locates a specific low caste as suitable for cleaning toilets resulting into vacant posts of cleaners.



# ***Location of Toilets***



# ***Use of Toilets***



***Unhygienic menstrual management practices that included avoidance of water, and use of rag-pads***



# Avoidance of water

*“Researcher: No. During periods we do not do **istanja** at all. That is forbidden. And that on such a level that if you go for potty, even then you do not wash. You have asked this question from them.*

*W4: They do not wash potty.*

*Researcher: No. They use cotton or cloth or something else. But they do not wash. They do not wash. If they wash then they try to ensure water does not touch the front portion. If water touches then you are in great trouble.”*

*(Discussion with health providers in Balochistan)*

# Avoidance of water

Bathing during menstruation was a sin, while others from Sindh and Baluchistan equated it to a 'crime'. Bathing restrictions lasted between 5 – 10 days, but sometimes even as long as 15 days

*“Researcher: Do you allow your daughter to bathe during menses?”*

*W1: Not on first 3 days. But on 4th day onward she may have a bath because it's hot.” (Conversation with mother of a young girl in Punjab)*



# ***Unhygienic use of rag pads***

- The most common absorption method reported was pads made from cloth; old, sometimes dirty.
- One cloth pad was often used for the whole day, including the night and only changed once it was completely soaked in blood.
- The used cloth pads were re-used multiple times, sometimes for months at length.







*“I dry them in a separate place not visible to anyone... There is small cupboard behind our room... a dirty place where all the garbage, like broken cycles are lying. In that place somewhere in between, we dry our cloth and under-wears.”* (Young woman, rural Punjab)



# ***Environmentally unfriendly disposal practices***

*Two key factors determined the mode of disposal*

- Men should not see the bloodstained pads
- Menstrual blood should not be used for black magic purposes



# ***Environmentally unfriendly disposal practices***

*"She said use of pads is sin, because rubbish picker collector are male. And blood is visible on pads. If menstruation blood is visible then that is sin."* (Observation notes of discussion with girls in school in Punjab)



# ***Underlying belief system***





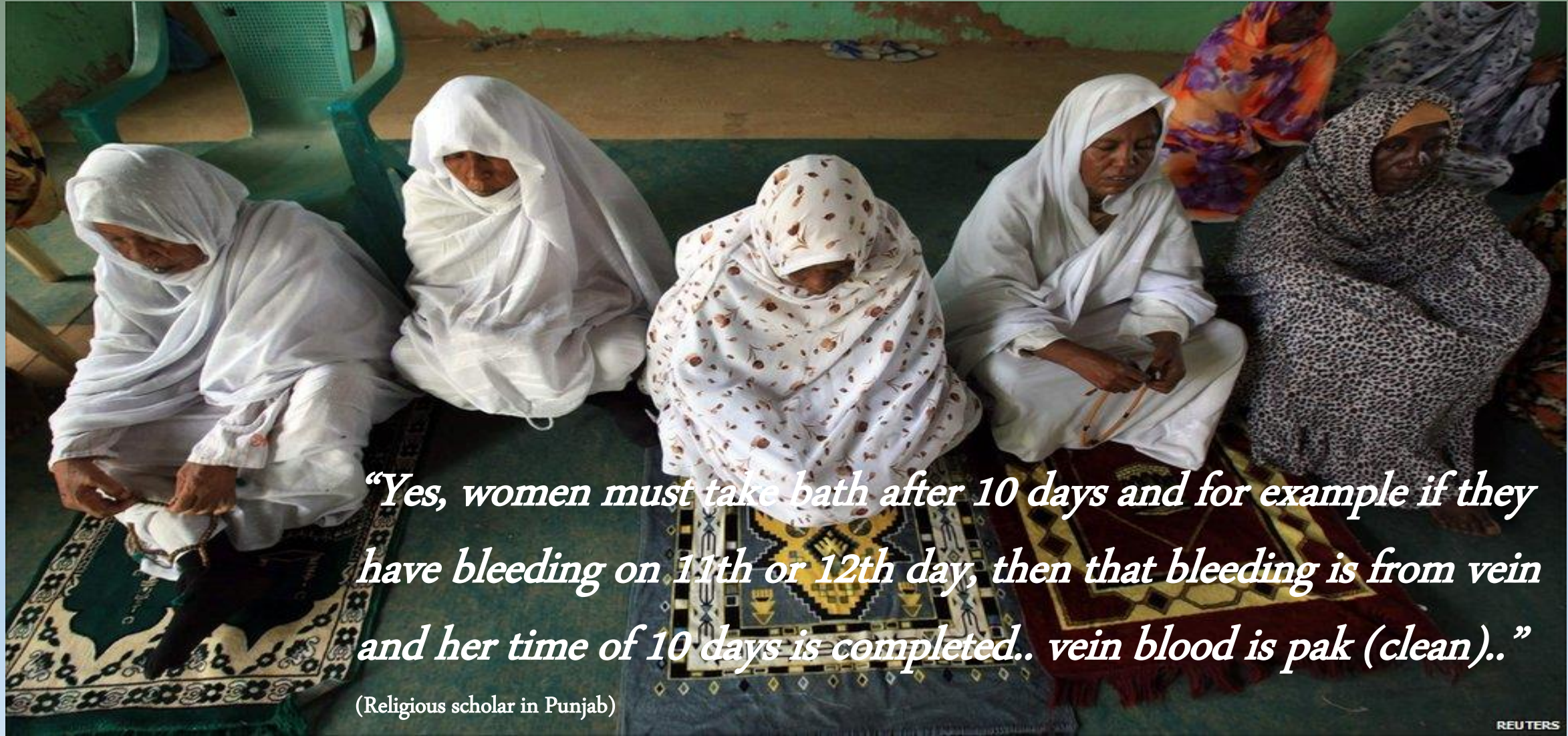
# ***Hot-cold humoral belief system***

*“They said cold water causes swelling, joint and body pains. Our body gets swollen, therefore we should not bathe and do istanja with cold water.”* (Field notes of researcher after participatory activity with grade 9 girls in Punjab)





# ***Menstruation as impure and dirty***



*“Yes, women must take bath after 10 days and for example if they have bleeding on 11th or 12th day, then that bleeding is from vein and her time of 10 days is completed.. vein blood is pak (clean)..”*

(Religious scholar in Punjab)

# ***Secrecy, Silence and Purdah***



*“They think that since the girl has started menstruating, she can potentially engage in sexual activity, which is very problematic outside of marriage. Young people who engage in sexual activity out of marriage can be killed, karokari (honor killing). So parents marry their daughters immediately after her first menstrual period.”* (Conversation with community members in rural Sindh, including out of school girls and lady health workers)

*“One day she left her pad cloth in the washroom in the open. There was no one at home at that time. Some guests came and one, a man, went to the washroom, and the pad was right there. She said that she was so ashamed and worried. She offered prayers and begged for forgiveness from Allah, that the man had seen her cloth”* (Woman in Punjab)



# ***Secrecy, Silence and Purdah***



***“We hide our menses. Even after marriage, I hide my menses. This is the practice in our society.” (Mother in Punjab)***



# ***Fear of Black Magic***

**Love Spells With  
Menstruation Blood**



## ***Conclusion***

**Predominant socio-cultural beliefs of menstruation lead to unhygienic menstrual practices ensuing into a negative impact on women and girls' health, dignity and confidence, as well as their participation in education, the community and the economy.**

# ***Recommendations***

- Breaking the silence and generating political will around the issue
- Development of culturally sensitive information resources to provide girls with scientific knowledge of menstruation and its hygienic management
- Building cultural specific toilet infrastructure that would enable girls to manage their menstrual hygiene needs without having to miss school
- Developing menstruation support facilities like low cost sanitary supplies, safe and secure facilities and easy and environment friendly disposal mechanisms
- Making MHM part of health education programs



**Questions/Comments**



**Thank you**