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Abstract

Purpose: To assess menstruation knowledge and stigmatization and support the perception of adolescent boys in a rural secondary school.

Materials and Methods: A cross-sectional descriptive study of 121 secondary school boys drawn from all classes using a simple random sampling technique. An interviewer-administered questionnaire was used to collect data on socio-demographic characteristics, knowledge, and perception of menstruation.

Findings: Most of the respondents, 55.4 % were aged between 15-18 years. Those in their fourth-year class (SS1) were more (40.5%). Some felt that menstruation was a disease (13.4%), contagious (24%), and unclean (29.8%). Those with correct knowledge of menarche were 97.5%. Those willing to obtain more knowledge on menstruation were 79.3%. More than half, 57% were unwilling to share food, items, and bedrooms with a menstruating female and 38.8 % believed that women should observe restrictions during their period. Those willing to offer support were 47.9% which was the highest and no support 1.7%. Teasing of

girls in their period was reported by 20.6% of the respondents.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: There was good knowledge of menarche. However, misconceptions about menstruation and teasing were observed. This study contributes to theory by exploring boys' perceptions of menstruation and linking their misinformation to menstrual stigma. Practically, it emphasizes the need for educational programs, awareness campaigns, and peer support systems to reduce stigma and improve understanding. On a policy level, it advocates for menstrual education in school curricula, gender equality in health education, and policies addressing cultural misconceptions around adolescent reproductive health. More health education on menstruation needs to be given to secondary school boys.

Keywords: *Adolescent Boys, Menstruation Knowledge, Stigmatization, Support Perception, Rural Secondary School, Benue State, Nigeria*

JEL code: 112,118, 125, J16, Z13

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Both boys and girls go through a major transitional period in their lives as puberty sets in, but how they experience and comprehend these changes—especially menstruation—can vary greatly.¹ Menstruation is surrounded by shame and secrecy for a lot of girls, which can cause unnecessary anxiety and negatively impact their academic performance, social interactions, and self-worth. Due to their ignorance of menstruation, young men have a significant part in perpetuating the deep-rooted societal myths and beliefs that underlie this stigma. These misconceptions have been around for generations.¹

A prevalent myth in many African countries, including Nigeria, portrays menstruation and puberty as a cause of shame for women. In contrast, male puberty is frequently glorified due to its relationship with strength and virility.² Sociocultural issues that negatively affect menstruation women in impoverished nations further accentuate this paradox. For example, Edet and colleagues in Cross River State Nigeria investigated the sociocultural factors that influence girls' educational experiences due to menstruation in Nigeria using cross-sectional design. The study highlighted how traditional beliefs, especially in rural areas, associate menstruation with impurity, which results in menstrual taboos and restrictions. Many Nigerian communities view menstruation as a topic that should not be openly discussed, perpetuating stigma and misinformation among adolescents. These beliefs lead to absenteeism among menstruating girls in schools due to shame, fear of embarrassment, and lack of proper menstrual management facilities. The study recommended that policymakers and educational stakeholders integrate menstrual health education into the school curriculum to address the negative impact of these sociocultural beliefs on girls' education.³ Also, another cross-sectional study in Taraba state, Nigeria looked at the pervasive stigma associated with menstruation in Nigeria and how it affects menstrual hygiene habits.

It demonstrated how cultural taboos prevent women from engaging in social or religious activities while they are menstruating because they are viewed as ritually unclean. The study also revealed how menstrual shame influences hygiene practices by discouraging candid conversations about menstrual health. Because of this, women and girls frequently do not have access to basic supplies like sanitary pads and water for personal hygiene. The authors suggested public health initiatives that emphasize educating people about menstruation, expanding access to menstrual hygiene products, and encouraging women to talk freely about their periods.⁴ Furthermore in other African countries, Thakuri et al reported Chhaupadi which is a centuries-old destructive religio-cultural practice and a deeply ingrained tradition. In some areas of the western Nepalese provinces of Karnali and Sudurpaschim, where women and girls are viewed as filthy, unclean, and untouchable during their menstrual cycle Chhaupadi is a frequent practice. In the Chhaupadi tradition, women and girls are not allowed to touch other people or objects and are excluded from social gatherings and a variety of everyday home tasks. Women and girls are banished by the Chhaupadi tradition to live and sleep in menstruation huts, Chhau huts, or livestock sheds. These behaviors, which lead to poor menstrual hygiene and negative physical and mental health outcomes, are motivated by detrimental beliefs and practices that are now prevalent in western Nepal.⁵

Similarly, Mohammed and his colleagues in Ghana reported a deeply rooted tradition where talking about menstruation in casual conversation is frowned upon, schoolgirls will often take considerable measures to hide any indications of their period, frequently out of fear of being made fun of and humiliated.⁶ Period taunting, which severely impedes female equality in educational chances and has been linked to the lack of appropriate menstrual hygiene facilities and constrictive societal norms in these areas.^{6,7}

The opinions and understanding of men and boys on menstruation and menstrual hygiene management are still poorly understood and inadequately explored, despite their potential influence. Poor menstrual health and hygiene has been partly attributed to lack of education and knowledge of puberty and menstruation apart from inadequate menstrual materials, clean water, disposal facilities and privacy. Hence the education of boys about menstruation is of utmost importance.⁸ Research in many of these contexts frequently concentrates almost entirely on women and girls, omitting the possible advantages of including boys in menstrual education. Boys are left without the information needed to support their female friends, which feeds the cycle of misinformation and shame. A review of 44 studies on teenagers' understanding of menstruation in low- and middle-income countries found that boys were rarely included, highlighting a significant vacuum in the literature.⁹ In Uganda, after a series of educational and support programmes in a government and private school, subsequent evaluation of the impact of the intervention by interviewing the girls revealed that boys began to help girls who had menstrual stains with their sweaters and no longer taunted girls during their menstrual periods. The boys in the study submitted that before the intervention, discussing menstrual issues was embarrassing and caused them psychosocial stress but that they became comfortable discussing menstruation after the intervention.

As brothers, peers, and potential coworkers, boys, especially adolescent boys, are important in supporting girls in managing their menstrual hygiene.^{10,11} Their participation is crucial to dismantling the stigmas and taboos related to menstruation. Men and boys may help create a more welcoming atmosphere that supports women's and girls' health by being aware of and supportive of menstruation health.^{7,11} The opinions and understanding of men and boys on menstruation and menstrual hygiene management, however, are still poorly understood and inadequately explored, despite their potential influence.

Generally, in developing nations, rural residents typically have less access to health information than their urban counterparts. This discrepancy may harm adolescents' beliefs and habits around menstrual hygiene by limiting their ability to obtain the necessary knowledge. enhanced menstrual hygiene management (MHM) for people living in rural areas.¹²

This study is supported by the Gender Schema Theory developed by psychologist Sandra Bem, which states that children learn about what it means to be male or female in their culture through a cognitive framework. The theory explains how cultural beliefs and gender norms in the community influence adolescent boys' knowledge and attitudes about menstruation. For instance, the prevailing gender schema in the community views menstruation as a taboo or a subject not to be openly discussed hence boys lack adequate knowledge of menstruation and develop stigmatizing attitudes. The traditional gender roles also view menstruation as solely a female issue, impacting the ability or willingness of boys to provide support. This study takes into cognizance how gender schemas affect the knowledge and attitudes of boys towards menstruation hence it is envisaged that the result from this study can help in designing interventions that challenge misconceptions and promote a more supportive environment.¹³

Problem Statement

In light of this, the current study evaluates teenage boys' perceptions of support, stigmatization, and menstruation knowledge in a rural secondary school in Benue State, Nigeria, to close the gap. It is anticipated that the results of this study will influence menstrual education policies, campaigns, and initiatives, with a focus on involving boys and men. In addition to giving boys a realistic and balanced view of menstruation, this study makes key contributions to 1. Theoretically, it expands knowledge of gender dynamics by exploring boys' perceptions of menstruation. which adds to socialization and stigma theories by linking boys' misinformation

with menstrual stigma. 2. Practically it highlights the need for education programs that include boys to reduce menstrual stigma. By promoting awareness campaigns and sensitivity training in schools and suggests building peer support systems to improve boys' understanding and support for menstruating girls. 3. Policy contributions: - the study seeks to advocate for menstrual education in school curricula for both boys and girls by supporting gender equality in health education policies in the form of adolescent reproductive health policies to address cultural misconceptions. This inclusive approach will help lessen the social stigma that young girls frequently face when they are menstruating.

2.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

A cross-sectional descriptive study of 121 secondary school boys drawn from all classes using a simple random sampling technique in a government secondary school in Agasha local government area in Benue state, Nigeria. Agasha is a rural area compared to Makurdi, the Capital of Benue state. The questionnaire was self-administered to collect data on sociodemographic characteristics, knowledge, and perception of menstruation. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 20. The students received health education on puberty including menstruation after filling out the questionnaires and asking questions that were addressed. Written informed consent was obtained from the parents, students, and teachers before the study. Only initials and serial numbers were written on the questionnaire. They were counseled to opt-out at any study stage if they were no longer comfortable with it.

3.0 FINDINGS

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Socio-demographic characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Age (years)		
< 10	6	5
11-14	33	27.3
15-18	67	55.4
>18	15	12.3
Total	121	100
Ethnic group		
Tiv	112	92.6
Idoma	5	4.1
Others	4	3.3
Total	121	100
Religion		
Christianity	119	98.3
Islam	2	1.7
Total	121	100
Class		
JSS 1	30	24.8
JSS 2	26	21.5
JSS 3	2	1.7
SS 1	49	40.5
SS 2	13	10.7
SS 3	1	0.8
Total	121	100

Slightly more than half, 55.4% of the respondents were aged 15-18 years. The majority were Tiv and Christians which are the dominant tribe and religion respectively. Most of the respondents were in Senior Secondary 1 which is the fourth year of secondary school.

Table 2: Participants' Responses to Knowledge and Perception of Menstruation

SN	Variables	Yes n (%)	No n (%)
1	Is menstruation a disease?	17 (14)	104 (86.0)
2	Is menstruation contagious?	29 (24)	92 (76.0)
3	Is menstruation hygienic?	36 (29.8)	85 (70.2)
4	Should girls not yet menstruating be told about menstruation?	67 (55.4)	54 (44.6)
5	Would you like to be told by a female you know that she is menstruating?	36 (29.9)	85 (70.1)
6	Would you like to have more knowledge on menstruation?	96 (79.3)	25 (20.7)
7	Will you share food, cup, bedroom etc with a female that is menstruating?	52 (43)	69 (57)
8	Should women observe restrictions from activities during their period?	47 (38.8)	74 (61.2)

The majority felt that menstruation was not a disease (86.6%), not contagious (76.0%) and not unhygienic (70.2%). More than half, 55.5% believed girls should not be told about menstruation before menarche. The majority, 69.4% felt uncomfortable being informed by a female that they were menstruating. Most of the respondents, 79.3% desired more knowledge on menstruation. Less than half, 43% were not willing to share food, items, or bedrooms with a menstruating female, and 47% felt women should observe restrictions during their period.

Table 3: Shows a Chi-Square Test of Association between Respondents' Responses to Stigmatizing Menstruating Females and Their Age and Class

Variables	Do you stigmatize girls menstruating n=121		Test statistics	Df	P - value
	n (%)	n (%)			
Age category			1.912	3	0.591
≤ 10	2 (33.3)	4 (66.7)			
11 – 14	8 (24.2)	25 (75.8)			
15 – 18	11 (16.4)	56 (83.6)			
>18	4 (26.7)	11 (73.3)			
Class			13.935	5	0.14
JSS1	9 (30.0)	21 (70.0)			
JSS2	9 (34.6)	17 (65.4)			
JSS3	0 (0.0)	2 (100.0)			
SS1	4 (8.2)	45 (91.8)			
SS2	2 (75.0)	1 (25.0)			
SS3	1 (50.0)	1 (50.0)			

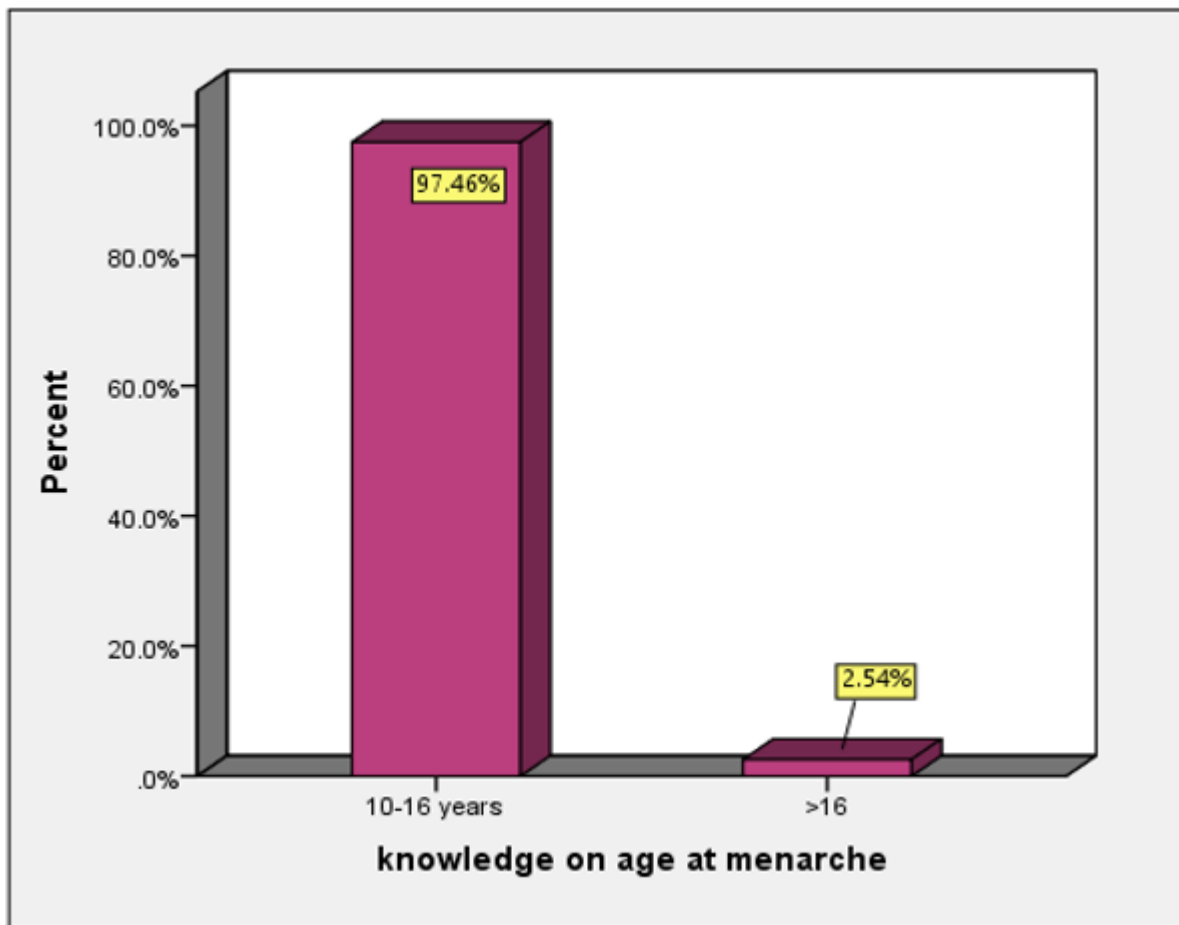


Figure 1: Correct Knowledge of the Age of Menarche

A majority, 97.46% had correct knowledge of age when menarche occurs.

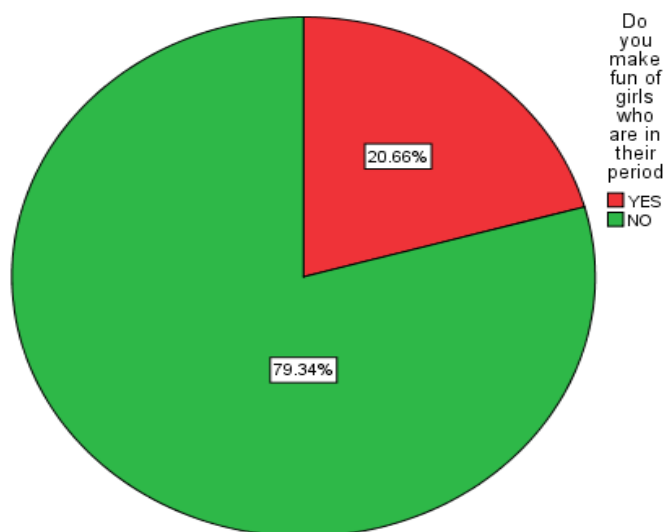


Figure 2: Stigmatizing or Teasing Girls Who Are in Their Period

Respondents who stigmatized or teased girls who were in their period made up 20.66%.

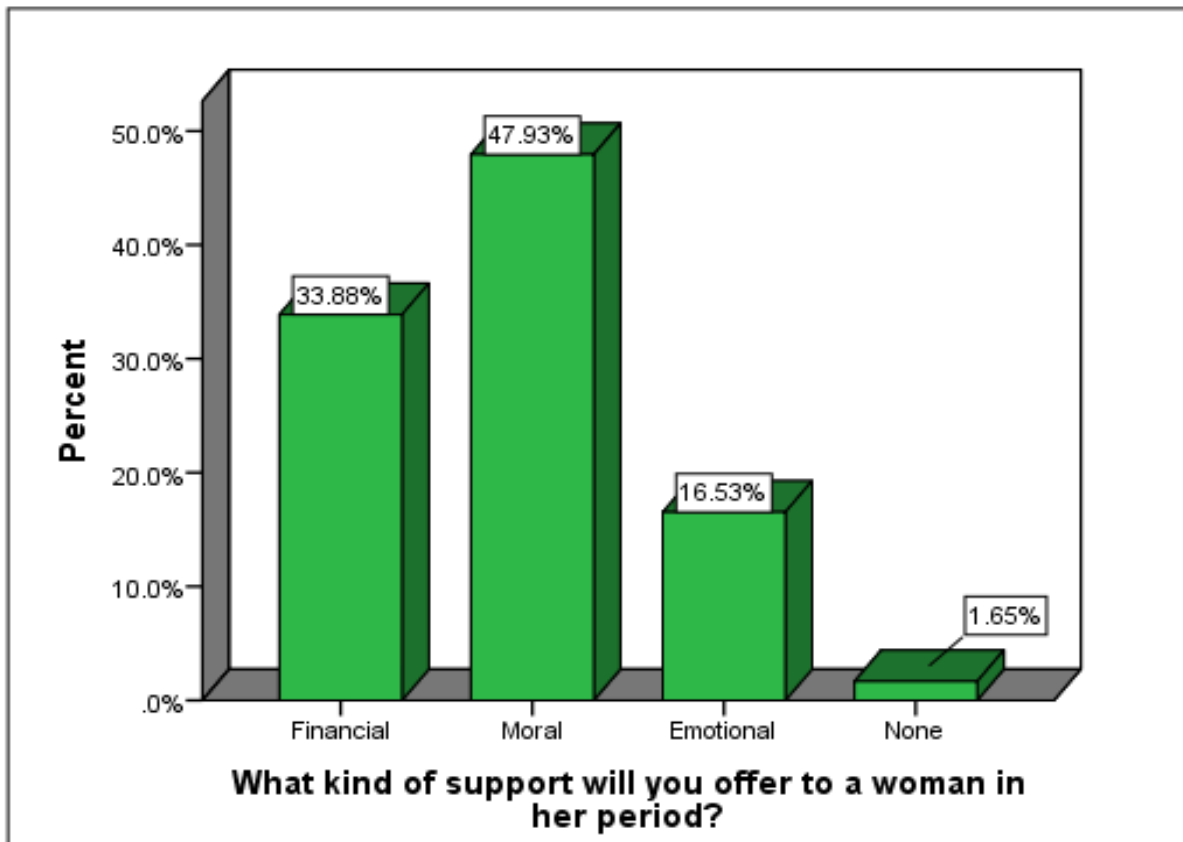


Figure 3: Types of Support Respondents Were Willing to Offer Those in Their Period

Discussion

Menstruation is an almost inevitable physiologic experience in women's lives, yet it is barely discussed.¹⁴ The women themselves have been found to have poor knowledge about menstruation, hence males who do not experience it may not be too interested in the subject.¹⁴ There is little literature on male views about menstruation. The males in this study were aged 10 - 21 years. The age group with the most respondents was aged 15-18 years (55.4%). Men and adolescent boys have an important role to play in supporting girls during their periods as brothers, peers, colleagues, and fathers. Men and boys can be activated to break the barriers and taboos around menstruation.⁹

The study revealed that 97.5% knew the correct age at menarche which is between 10 -16 years. This may be because the majority of the respondents were older adolescents aged between 15-18 years and may have received more school lessons on puberty-related topics as reported in an Indian study.¹⁵ In a focused group discussion with adolescent secondary school boys in Ghana.⁶ It was reported that most of them who had heard about menstruation thought that menarche occurred between 10-19 years and had an idea about what menstruation is about, even though some of them revealed that it is scarcely discussed among boys.⁶ In this study, a majority (69.4%) of the respondents reported that they felt uncomfortable being informed by a female that they were menstruating. Interestingly, 79.3% expressed the desire to know more about menstruation. A qualitative study by Cheng-Yu et al in Taiwan reported that male students expressed more negative attitudes towards menstruation than female students.¹⁴ This suggests that more health education on menstruation should be carried out among boys. This

can change the boys' mindset into accepting that menstruation is a natural occurrence and should not be seen as an abnormal occurrence.

Some of the respondents in this study believed that menstruation was a disease (13.4%), contagious (24%), and unclean (29.8%). This may be due to the negative myths, misconceptions, and superstitions about menstruation. This negative myth affects the emotional, educational, and even physical health of females adversely, and hence more studies on how to reduce this untoward effect is needed.^{6,14}

Other findings in this study were that over half of the boys (55.5%) felt that girls should not be informed about menarche before experiencing it. According to a qualitative study conducted among teenage schoolboys in Taiwan, the boys felt that discussing menstruation was unnecessary because it would not have an impact on their future employment.¹⁴ In Tanzania the finding was similar as boys believed it is strongly inappropriate for girls to reveal period status or to discuss periods with males.⁷ On sharing items, food, and bedroom with menstruating females, 43% of the respondents declined. Furthermore, some of the boys (38.8%) expressed support for the opinion that girls should be restricted from activities during menstruation. Other studies corroborated this finding as girls in their periods were made to observe religious, domestic, and social restrictions during their periods.^{12,15} The respondents in this study were subsequently educated on puberty to correct the wrong impressions some of them expressed.

Some of the respondents in this study were willing to give moral (47.9%), financial (33.9%), and emotional (16.5%) support while 1.7% were not willing to offer any support to a female who is menstruating. UNICEF and other scholars advocate for four key areas of support for menstruation: social support, knowledge and skills, facilities and services, and access to absorbent materials and supportive supplies.^{16,17,18} More awareness of all forms of support for females during menstruation is necessary for them to menstruate with dignity.

Teasing of girls during their period was seen in 20.6% of the respondents in this study. This can make the menstruation experience of girls quite frustrating. This concurs with the finding in Tanzania where 13% of girls had experienced period teasing, and more than 80% feared being teased, especially by male classmates.⁷ Educating boys on menstruation should be given more prominence in schools. This can reduce their knowledge gap and provide accurate information thereby reducing the social stigma and misconceptions around menstruation that young girls often experience.¹⁹

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Males, particularly teenage boys, have a significant responsibility to encourage girls during this time of menstruation as fathers, peers, brothers, and coworkers. It is possible to dismantle the stigmas and taboos around menstruation by engaging men and boys.

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