

Menopause and Femininity: Qualitative Enquiry into Menopause of Urban Women from Pune, Maharashtra

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ABSTRACT The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of postmenopausal women with specific reference to perceived effect of menopause on femininity and subjective description of feeling about attaining menopause. This was a cross-sectional study based on indepth interviews of the purposively selected 52 postmenopausal urban women from four different sites from city of Pune, Maharashtra, India. Average age at menopause was 47.6 years. Majority of them had a traumatic menopausal phase hence final relief was appreciated positively. Sixteen respondents thought their femininity was affected because of menopause. Opinions expressed about loss of femininity were all part of individual's perceptions, changing notions about social role and own circumstances but majority urban women viewed menopausal transition from socio-cultural perspective and dissociate reproduction from femininity. This calls for widespread awareness generation among women however literate they may be.

INTRODUCTION

A total of 130 million Indian women are expected to live beyond menopause into old age by 2015. Menopause and post menopausal health is emerging as an issue owing to rapid increased longevity in urban middle-aged Indian women, who are evolving as a homogeneous group. However, most remain uninformed of the short- and long-term implications of the associated morbid conditions due to lack of awareness, and inability to bear the ever-increasing cost of the medical or health care (Sengupta 2003). Several studies have indicated that Asian women's experience of menopause is different and it affects them differently (Lock 2002). Women have been reported to appreciate menopause in developing countries and especially in India (Flint and Samil 1990; Singh and Arora 2005; Gupta et al. 2006). Many researchers believed that reactions to menopause are largely cultural phenomenon. Cultural explanations of these differences need to include many factors including beliefs and attitudes to the menopause and the social status of middle aged and older women (Lock 2005).

Therefore, the current paper explores the experiences of post-menopausal women with specific reference to perceived effect of menopause on femininity and subjective description of feeling about attaining menopause.

METHOD

This was a cross sectional study on a purposively selected sample. This brief research note is based on the analysis of 52 indepth interviews of the post menopausal women from four selected sites in the city of Pune, Maharashtra. The chief criterion for inclusion in the sample was that women who has experienced menopause naturally in last five years and could recall what it felt like during menopause for them. During indepth interviews detailed information on individual experiences, subjective description of the severity of the symptoms, felt impact on femininity, and other relevant socio-economic data was gathered.

RESULTS

The mean age of the respondents was 50.61 years, which ranged from 47 to 55 years. Majority (48) of the respondents were married and more than half (33) of the respondents were studied up to graduation or more. Two-third respondents were working and contributing to the family income. Reported family income ranged from

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minimum of 10 thousand to more than 30 thousand rupees per month. Average age at menopause was 47.61 years, which ranged from 43 to 51 years.

First reaction after the attainment of menopause was, freedom from monthly ritual, moreover freedom from irregularities of bleeding, physical discomfort and religious restrictions. Respondents narrated their experiences during in-depth interviews. Some of them had a traumatic menopausal phase that is why the final relief was appreciated while some passed through this phase instantly without much annoyance.

A respondent, housewife and mother of three children, who had described a difficult eight-year menopause transition that started at the age of 43 years. *'During the peri menopause stage I felt I have suddenly become old and unpleasant, and I was very bad-tempered and forlorn. Suddenly I would become aggressive and would fight with everybody including vegetable vendors, shopkeepers and so on. However, now that I am almost completely out the other side, I finally feel very fine about myself. Though one reads or hear about menopausal symptoms but this was all unexpected. Today, I am very happy that I am on the other side.'*

At the same time, a few (16) expressed the feeling of emptiness (vacuum). Loss of hormonal balance was considered equivalent to loss of feminine character especially because of changes in the reproductive physiology. Complete cessation of menstrual cycle brought a feeling of lack of something, (*kamtarta aali*) or had a feeling of emptiness (*pokli nirman zali*). They believed that monthly menstrual bleeding would clean their body of 'dirty blood'. As this process was discontinued at menopause they believed that they have grown physically weak, lost interest and enthusiasm. They felt that their importance had decreased (*kamipana yeto*), (*mahatva kami hote*) and that they were of no use (*nikami janevate*). This was an indirect remark about the reduced sexuality and attractiveness. Thus they associated menopause with loss of femininity (*stritvaver parinam hoto*). This was further thought to be interfering with their confidence and self-image and self-esteem. Decreased physical capacity, loss of interest from social life, loss of sexual interests, loss of stamina, feeling of being old, feeling depressed was associated with menopause. Surprisingly, majority of these women were housewives and from higher economic group. They felt that 'something is missing'

from the life. A representative narrative from a higher income class respondent, 48 years old and post menopausal for 3 years.

'I have recently celebrated 20th marriage anniversary and we have had a satisfying life. However menopause has changed our relation to certain extent. I get irritated with small things and my husband complains that I pick up a fight over very insignificant issue. There is a change in our marital relation and I cannot stop thinking that I have lost a part of myself.'

With exception of these 16, respondents did not associate self-image with menopause and opined that a woman remains as feminine as before. A respondent aged 51 years, lecturer in a renowned college teaching economics mentioned, 'menopause is a natural physiological process and though the menstrual cycle stops, other female characteristics are still present in the woman. No need to even discuss such issues and raise unnecessary debate.' She stopped and warned the researcher not to entertain such ideas from other women.

A graduate housewife aged 54 years grandmother of two mentioned that, *'Menopause is a physical process while femininity is a concept developed by mind, attitude and culture. It is dependent upon the way one is brought up, her education, and reading and natural behaviour. There is an end of only reproductive capacity, which is anyways not required at this later age when the desired family size is achieved. I do not think my image as a woman is stained because of menopause.'*

Another respondent, working in a private firm aged 46 years gave a very learned comment, *'There is a transition in woman's role in family. There is decrease in attractiveness as compared to age 20, but at this stage one achieves a respectful look with dignity as a senior member in the society. Career graph excels, confidence rises. All these things contribute to development of a self image which is useful in restoring your femininity even after menopause.'*

Bearing in mind the different social role and needs; respondents considered menopause as essential. Many of the working respondents felt that femininity was associated more with their ability to do feminine role of caring and being responsible in family matters. To be able to carry out domestic roles along with job responsibilities was considered equally feminine. Reduced beauty due to skin changes and obesity was

considered as a part of menopause or getting old. Respondent's personal experience of menopausal symptoms and perceived severity of these problems shaped their attitude towards menopause and self-image. Inability to work and participate in the family and social life was considered as an indicator of the severity of the problem. 'Loss' of fertility represented only a minor concern as most women had lived through a successful reproductive life. For women without personal or career interests, however, grown-up children and occupied husband left a gap in life.

DISCUSSION

A few respondents found to be more concerned about their appearance, sexuality and changes in their moods and body. This phenomenon was much similar to the Western societies for whom menopause represents a challenging and difficult period. The perceived loss of youth and beauty at menopause indicated a major embarrassment for them. Crossing of this imagined doorway into old age was a measure stumbling block for many (Bachmann 1994). Studies have affirmed that appearance-related menopausal concerns may be especially strong for those women who objectify their bodies as prescribed by the cultural context that defines women in terms of their appearance (McKinley and Hyde 1996). Having negative attitudes towards menopause or anxiety about aging may increase this sort of objectification (McKinley and Lyon 2008). Though the cultural context in India is different than Western culture, researcher would like to argue that in the changing cosmopolitan cultural context of urban India; individual's circumstances, experiences and perceptions may change and provide respondents a ground to associate menopause with loss of femininity.

Majority of the respondents in the present study experienced menopause as a normal process of aging rather than as disease or loss of womanhood, femininity. For majority of the respondents, menopause found to be a process consisting of physical and hormonal changes in women's bodies happening alongside changes associated with ageing in general, and changes in women's family and social life. These changes were easily acceptable as they were considered as a constructed part of society, which have been carried forward from generations to the present. For them, menopause indicated end of the

childbearing years and for many older women it was associated with end of years of raising children. Although the Western culture views midlife women's body weight and associated changes in the appearance as unattractive, not all women draw on that definition of femininity in Indian culture. Instead, many in this study provided a more relevant explanation of femininity that is defined by independence, self-acceptance and self-reliance.

In this context, the researcher would like to draw attention to the studies done in recent decade by experts from Sociology, Anthropology. They have investigated menopause and stated that attitude towards menopause, views on femininity, and changes in physical and emotional health attributed to menopause can be viewed from a cultural perspective. According to Crawford, body is a cultural object, which provides us with a powerful medium through which we interpret and give expression to our individual and social experience. Bodily states are key markers manifesting the social definitions of the self, role, normality and abnormality. It is called as a powerful source for metaphor (Crawford 1984). Similarly, the social construction of menopause in Indian set up provided a sense of relief to the respondents. Getting old was interpreted in more positive manner as one gaining status and authority within the traditional age stratified society. A cultural base of strong social bonding has nonetheless given a higher status to the elderly and thus respondents associated menopause with the grand parenting and changed (elevated) social status. The cultural context made suffering and pain of menopause easier and provided positive outlook in the minds of the respondents about mid life changes.

After menopause, many women reported, what anthropologist Margaret Mead identified as 'post-menopausal zest' (Klatz and Goldman 2003). This sense of well-being, individuality and positive attitude towards new roles in life drives women into the rewarding period of their lives. Though some emphasis on remaining young and beautiful, majority post-menopausal women reported positive attitude toward menopause, which may indicate that once women have gone through menopause they find it to be less troubling than they anticipated earlier in life.

Thus, women may feel positively about changes, however, they may also feel negatively about changes in appearance and perceived

femininity. These findings are consistent with the mixed feelings women are likely to have about menopause in many other societies (Chrisler 2007).

CONCLUSION

For many women, the word menopause and all its losses proved less dangerous because around 50s they experience quite different landmarks, with different conclusions, as well as different personal and social meanings. Opinions expressed about loss of femininity, distressing symptoms or appreciating menopause were all part of individual's own circumstances and no generalization can be made from a few women's experiences. Yet, study suggests looking at menopause from women's perspective, which is embedded into social, cultural and personal environment. Changing urban environment may add to the existing anxieties of urban women. This calls for widespread awareness about physiological and psychological changes among menopausal women irrespective of their socio-economic circumstances.

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