

Nepal's young women endure painful 'fallen womb' syndrome

March 16 2014, by Ammu Kannampilly

Sita Pariyar had barely recovered from childbirth when her uterus slipped out of her body, making her one of hundreds of thousands of Nepalese women struck by a debilitating reproductive condition.

Sleep-deprived and unsteady on her feet, Pariyar was carrying firewood home to her village in the hilly district of Dhading on the outskirts of Nepal's capital Kathmandu when she felt her [uterus](#) collapse.

"It was painful and terrifying. I had no idea what was happening," the 25-year-old mother of four told AFP.

Uterine prolapse, a condition which sees the uterus or womb descend into and protrude out of the vagina, usually strikes post-menopausal women.

In Nepal, however, 44 percent of cases involve women in their twenties, according to UN data.

A recent report by Amnesty International blames widespread gender discrimination in the predominantly rural Himalayan nation for the unusually high incidence of uterine prolapse among young Nepalese women.

"It's high time it is seen as a human rights issue, not just a women's health issue," Madhu Malhotra, director of Amnesty's Gender, Sexuality and Identity Programme, told AFP.

A 2011 health ministry survey said uterine prolapse was the "most frequently reported cause of poor health among women of reproductive age", affecting about one in 10 Nepalese women.

Pariyar, whose impoverished Dalit family lies at the bottom of Nepal's caste system, had little rest during her pregnancies or after childbirth, when she was expected to do everything from cutting wood and feeding cattle to farming and housework.

By the time she was 20, she was a mother to three girls and faced unrelenting pressure from her husband and his family to give birth to a son.

"My husband would get drunk, beat me and threaten to marry again, all because I couldn't give him a son," she recalled.

When she finally gave birth at home to a boy four years ago, her relief was short-lived. Two weeks later, she experienced heavy bleeding and shortly after, her uterus prolapsed.

As the organ descended into her vagina, often leaking fluid, sexual intercourse became increasingly painful. When she told her husband about her condition, he hit her and called her "a dirty woman", magnifying her anxieties.

Stubborn stigma

Deep-rooted social stigma around the condition makes many women hesitant to seek help.

Binda Dhamala suffered uterine prolapse in her twenties. Since then the 49-year-old villager's condition has worsened to the point where her uterus protrudes, making it impossible for her to work, walk or even sit

comfortably.

Ten years ago, her daughter, Madhuri Thakuri experienced a sharp pain when her uterus prolapsed.

"Every time I cough, urine seeps out," she said.

"I am always worried it is going to fall out. It hurts so much and I feel dirty and embarrassed all the time," Thakuri, now 28, told AFP.

Such stories are familiar to Aruna Uprety, a Kathmandu-based expert on public health who has spent more than two decades working with uterine prolapse patients.

"It strikes [younger women](#) because they are malnourished, married off early and have babies at an age when their bodies can't handle it.

"Most of them deliver at home, where traditional birthing practices can also damage the uterus," Uprety told AFP.

'Nepal's shame'

Many women in Nepal do not have easy access to healthcare and rarely get time to recover from childbirth before being expected to work in the fields.

In 2008, Nepal's Supreme Court called the high incidence of uterine prolapse a violation of reproductive rights and ordered the government to act quickly.

The state responded by promoting, and in some cases, funding hysterectomies.

But campaigners say surgeries should only be suggested in advanced cases, and that a surgery-focused drive may actually make younger women, hoping to get pregnant, more reluctant to seek help.

Inexpensive alternatives—such as a silicone ring pessary, a device that supports the uterus—or preventive measures are not given their due, doctor Uprety said.

"It is Nepal's shame that in the 21st century so many young women are suffering so much," she said.

"And we still don't have extensive national data so we may only have hit the tip of the iceberg."

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