

Coastal women losing their uterus due to salty water

Jesmin Papri, jagonews24.com, 23 August 2020

Salinity has increased in coastal areas of the country due to global warming. Women in these areas are increasingly getting sick from uterus related diseases as they rely on these water sources. Some of them even have to go through hysterectomy (uterus removal) at an early age.

Thirty-year old Asma Begum from Satkhira's Sora Village at Dweep Union of Shyamnagar sub-district, in the south-west of Bangladesh, is a case in point. She had a hysterectomy at 23 for using salty water.

Asma tells Jago News, "I had bleeding problems since puberty. However, after my first child, I used to feel severe burning and pain in my uterus. After the third child, I learned about the infection. When it was intolerable, the doctor removed the uterus as the best possible solution."

She added, "I've been using the salty water of Gabura, a small union at the brink of the Sundarbans which was ravaged by Cyclone Aila in 2009, since my birth since parents and in-laws are from the same area. However, now the saltiness is so severe that sometimes it's impossible to use it during the summer. But this is the only alternative for bathing and other household needs."

Rawshan Jamil, 27, had to remove her uterus when she was even younger than Asma, who is her neighbour. She had tumors in her uterus and doctors removed them. Needless to say, both their husbands left them and remarried.

It is not a phenomenon limited to Gabura only but women from every village of coastal Shyamnagar Upazila has been found to be suffering from uterus related diseases. Studies show that uterus related diseases are rampant in villages with the salinity problem.

Amina Begum (28), living in Ruiyar Beel of Protapnagar Union in Ashashuni said to JaagoNews, "I feel a severe pain in my lower abdomen. Can't even feel the lower portion sometimes. It feels like something has been torn away. Besides, I there is almost a constant vaginal discharge which makes it itch too. And it hurts during urination."

"Doctors suggested removing the uterus. But my husband rejected the idea. He says I am still young. I am under doctor's observation, but I get these pains and cramps more than 10-15 days a month,"

Shyamnagar's medical record says that 10% of the yearly operations are related to uterus, most of which result in its removal.

Studies show that, 5% of Sundarban Nursing Home's operations were of uterus removal in 2019. In the same year, it was 8% in Nagar clinic and 11% in Bangshipur Clinic.

The reporter has interviewed at least 60 women from Shyamnagar. Among them, at least 25 have already removed their uterus. Some of the rest are planning to remove and others are suffering from various symptoms.

Doctors say that chronic problems in the uterus can result in cancer.

Another hospital from Shyamnagar, Friendship Hospital, informs that 380 women were diagnosed with uterus related diseases from April to December of 2019. Among them, 23

had a high risk of cancer and two of them were referred to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University in Dhaka and others to Khulna Medical College.

Dr. Tasnuva Afrin, doctor of Shyamnagar Friendship Hospital said to Jaago News, “On an average, I treat 900 patients per month; there will be 10- 12 women who have had hysterectomy. And there are many more with similar complaints.”

“They find the removal of uterus as the best possible solution, may be due to the lack of communication gap, financial crisis etc. The irony is, this removal results in more complex and increased physical problems, such as hot flush, short temper etc. Not just that, many husbands leave their wives too.”

She believes if they received proper treatment and guidelines, many of them would never have to remove their uterus.

A research titled as ‘Effects of Salinity Spreading Infectious Diseases’ (2018) says, women of southern coastal areas repetitively use and wash clothes in salty water which they use for menstruation. This accelerates their chance of getting various diseases.

Women of all ages are suffering from Leukorrhea

Women of all ages are using polluted and salty water day in and day out. This leads to Leukorrhea which slowly results in cancer, say researchers.

Reshma Akter, a medical officer of Burigoalini Health and Family Welfare Centre, says, “Almost every woman here suffers from Leukorrhea, even children that are two or three years old. Besides, uterus-related complaints, anaemia, dysentery, skin diseases, dysmenorrhea (irregular monthly cycle) are also found frequently.”

Josna Rani (26), a housewife from Burigoalini, says, “Doctors advice not to take bath in pond waters. The irony is, we are bound to do it which is used by at least 60-70 people. That’s why this disease is considered as normal now.”

Doctors say, leukorrhea, as well as polluted water, accelerates uterus damage. Dr. Tasnuva Afrin says to Jaago News, “Long- term leukorrhea results in urinary tract infection, pelvis inflammation, infertility and even cervical cancer.”

“Adults may face leukorrhea. But if it shows in children, it means they don’t drink enough water, bathe in a polluted ponds or rivers, don’t have proper hygiene, face malnutrition, have worms etc.” She adds, “I’ve seen a lot of patients. This basically happens for two reasons - either they use polluted water or they remain extremely unhygienic due to lack of knowledge and education.”

At least 15 parents in this locality have said their children aged 2-3 are suffering from leukorrhea. Moreover, 15 teenaged girls also complained the same along with irregular monthly cycles.

Dr. Hussain Shafayat, civil surgeon of Shatkhira says, “Many women of Shyamnagar are affected by various skin and water- borne diseases along with the problem of leukorrhea. However, these diseases are comparatively a lot lesser in other areas of the country. Basically, salty water leads to these diseases.”

Shormind Nilormi, Associate Professor of Jahangirnagar University says, “I’ve been working on climate change for quite a long time. Excessive salinity in coastal water is the result of climate change which also leads to various physical difficulties.”

“Periodic cycle gets affected by salinity. Also, their internal organs get severely damaged besides becoming vulnerable to many other diseases,” says Nilormi.

Skin disease and illness all over the area

Health worker Deepali herself came to the hospital to buy medicine for skin disease. She says, “Each of my family members are suffering from various diseases like - acidity, dysentery, skin infection etc. We all know it happens due to water salinity. What should we do? There is no other option.”

Nasima Parvin from the same union says the same. All her family members are suffering from skin disease and dysentery.

Burigoalini union’s Health and Family Welfare’s records testify to the widespread problem. Twelve percent of the people suffer from dysentery, 15% from weakness, 16% from worms etc. Not only that, people frequently take medicine for pain, gastric, skin diseases as well.

“I have sores all over the lower portion of my body. Even my husband left me over this. There is no escape from salinity. Our sufferings know no bounds come summer,” says Jesmin Begum from Sora village of Gabura.

On the way, we found Aklima Khatun, 10, with rough hair and some kind of skin rash on both her hands. As a result, Aklima hardly goes to school. She also says that most of her classmates are suffering from the same skin disease, though her illness is more severe than others.

As we spoke to Aklima, there were around 10 children bathing in a pond nearby. They said they had no other option but to use that salty water.

At least 30 people of all ages said that every one of them is suffering from skin disease.

Helena Bilkis, health care provider from Dumuria Community Clinic says, “Benzyl Benzoate Application is effective to cure these skin diseases. We need at least 6 bottles for one and a half months. However, government can barely supply 2 bottles due to the excessive demand. Thus many patients remain untreated.”

In just half an hour, 31 patients were seen collecting the mentioned medicine.

Water is the root of all problems

Helena Bilkis also says, “From my eight years of experience, I am certain that at least 90% of people are affected by water-borne diseases; most of them are children and women. The largest number suffers from skin diseases as two to five hundred people bath in each pond.”

Khadija Khatun, profusely sweating in the summer heat was carrying her child on her way to collect water, says, “I collect drinking water from a filter two kilometres away. In the rainy season, we collect rain water for drinking. Every year the salinity decreases in ponds during the monsoon. However, this year there was no sign of remission even during the rains.” She also adds that at least 400 people use the pond.

Visiting that pond, many ducks were seen floating on the water, children were bathing, people were collecting water maintaining a long queue, though it barely took two seconds to collect water.

Khadija says, “Even after knowing everything, we are compelled to collect water from there. We don’t even have enough money to buy large tanks to collect rain water for long-term use.”

Dr. Tasnuva Afrin says, “A certain amount of salt in water works as antiseptic sometimes. However, excessive salinity results in skin disease, uterus infection etc.”

London Imperial College and Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies conducted a research, titled as “Salinity in Drinking Water and Maternal Health in Coastal Areas”. It was found that during pregnancy, pre-eclampsia and high blood pressure is excessive in coastal areas due to the excessive salinity, especially in summer. However, it gets better in rainy seasons.

About 40 million coastal people depend on ponds, rivers and tube wells for drinking water. However, salinity in these water sources have increased in a higher rate due to climate change, poor water management and shrimp farming. Meanwhile, about 100 kilometres of land remain under excessive salinity. Researchers say, this will increase due to climate change in near future.

Another research titled as “Distribution of Ground Water Salinity and Its Seasonal Variability in the Coastal Aquifers of Bengal Delta” also reflects this problem mentioning that the salinity has increased excessively in coastal areas. They also mention that in dry seasons, the rate of chloride in coastal climate remains about 103-12, 433 and in rainy seasons it is about 11,366.

Price of water remains beyond reach

Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) sells 1,000 litres (1 unit/1 cubic metre) of water for Tk 8.49. The same quantity is sold for Tk 4.5 in Khulna. People of Shyamnagar, Shatkhira buy 20 litres of processed drinking water for Tk 10.

The same situation prevails in 19 coastal areas. It seems like they lead a completely different life compared to that of the rest of the country.

Families in coastal areas collect rain water for at least 4 to 5 months. People with a little more money collect it in a water tank. But for the rest of the year, they depend on the supplied water by government. They buy each litre of water for at least 50 paisas, sometimes it reaches 70 paisas.

Akram Hossain from Isshoripur Union says, “I collect water from the water treatment plant we have. That costs me 90 paisas per litre.”

His five-member family needs at least 20 litres of water every day. That means he needs 600 litres in a month which costs at least Tk 540.

According to Bangladeshi Bureau of Statistics, in 2010, average family income was Tk 11,879. In Barishal and Khulna it was Tk 9,158 and Tk 9,599 respectively. Therefore, the expense of buying drinking water is about 3% of the total earning, even for an average. It would be much more for poorer families.

Dr. Anwar Zahid, director of Bangladesh Water Development Board says, “Testing groundwater level, we’ve found that coastal areas like Shyamnagar and Kaliganj have

200-250 feet water level which is extremely salty. There is no water in the next 1100 feet of the ground. However, after 600-700 feet, drinking water level has been found in Gabura which is not enough, though. Moreover, an average family cannot afford to set up a tube well that deep.”

He adds, “As a result, most of them depend on surface water. This water is not only too salty but also severely polluted. Consequently, they suffer from various water-borne diseases.”

Dr. Anwar Zahid also says, “Not only climate change but also artificial fisheries result in excessive salinity.”

Scarcity of Nutritious Food

Due to excessive salinity, crops are rarely seen to grow. Most of the people live on fisheries. As they produce it commercially, most of the local people don't eat the fish. Even if they do, they suffer from severe malnutrition. Specially the women and young girls suffer from it as they barely have fresh vegetables to eat.

Nazrul Islam, medical officer of Isshoripur Health and Family Welfare Center says, “Most of the young girls and women suffer from malnutrition and anaemia. Mothers also suffer from skin diseases, dysentery etc.” He opines that it happens due to consuming very little fresh vegetable.

Deepali Rani Chowkidaar from Arpangashia village says, “We get homegrown vegetables for only 2/3 months in a year due to lack of fresh water. For the rest of the year, we need to buy it. Our budget is not that flexible to buy fresh vegetables frequently.”

Togori Sheel from Arpangashia PN High School says, “There is more suffering when we need to buy vegetables.”

While she elaborates her menu, we get to know that she eats lentils and fish only once in three days; the rest of the week she generally eats nothing but potato and eggplant curry. Sometimes she consumes potato and rice only, thrice a day.

Nasima Khatun from Gabura says, “Where will we get vegetables that easily? Even grass doesn't grow here. Sometimes we plant some vegetables in the rainy season. Many don't have the ability to buy them all year round. Sometimes we catch fish from river; however, that too is rare these days due to too much demand.”

“We were used to food scarcity but not water. Since the tornado Aila hit in 2009, all the dams were destroyed and salty water entered the villages. No one has ever bathed in normal water since then,” says Akbor Ali Sana, 58, in a tone of grief.

He says with a heavy voice, “Last 10-11 years have changed our life drastically while fighting with salty water. I pray that such misery never befalls anyone.”