

Wombs falling victim to greed

Jesmin Papri, Dainik Bangla, 19 December 2021

40-year-old Rahima Begum of Jayakhali village of Shyamnagar upazila of Satkhira district was suffering from dysuria, along with vaginal bleeding and white discharge. Seven months ago, she went to see Dr Sujit Roy in the upazila sadar. Sujit is the Assistant Registrar, Department of Surgery, Satkhira Medical College Hospital; But he regularly sees patients in private chambers and conducts surgery at the local 'Sundarban Apollo Hospital and Diagnostic Centre'. After seeing and hearing the condition of the patient, he informed her that one of Rahima's organs will have to be surgically removed.

Rahima became worried. She later went to another clinic and consulted a gynaecologist and took the medicines she suggested and got better for a few days. But due to various problems during the Corona lockdown, she could not go to that gynaecologist and had to go to Dr Sujit again.

Rahima was sharing her experiences with us on September 9. She said, 'The doctor was very angry as I didn't undergo surgery as suggested by him.'

After being scolded by the doctor, Rahima and her husband went to the owner of Sundarban Apollo Clinic and the 'famous doctor' of the area Md. Shah Jahan Siraj. After hearing everything, he also suggested that surgery is the only solution. But Rahima was not convinced. For further verification, the couple went to Dr Sheikh Arafat of that same Apollo Hospital. He prescribed some medicine for Rahima.

After being severely confused, the couple finally agreed to trust the 'local boy' Dr Shah Jahan and decided to undergo surgery. On September 2, Dr Sujit Roy of Sundarban Apollo conducted the surgery and removed a very important part of Rahima's body.

Another incident is that of Khadija Begum of Kaikhali village in Shyamnagar. This woman living in the coastal area had problems with irregular periods and lower abdominal pain. For treatment, she visited a local MRI Clinic. Where the physician was the lecturer of the Biochemistry Department of Satkhira Medical College, Dr Anisur Rahman. Anisur also suggested cutting off one of Khadija's organs. On August 28, government doctor Anisur surgically removed that important organ from the body of 32-year-old Khadija Begum in the OT of a private clinic.

The organ that was cut off from the body of these two women of different ages was not an ordinary organ. It is where a person is born or the uterus. In coastal areas like Shyamnagar in Satkhira, women suffer the most from the intrusion of salt water. They have to live with salt water all year round and suffer from various diseases. Especially from uterine diseases. But if this organ, which is the most important for the reproduction of the human species, is affected, some doctors in the region are deciding to cut it off without considering any other method of treatment.

After investigating in Shyamnagar for 15 consecutive days, from 6 to 21 September, it has been revealed that doctors and their allied hospital-clinic owners have been doing such

work for money. Prominent citizens and legal experts have called it a violation of human rights and a serious crime punishable by law.

Women living in coastal areas are suffering from various skin and uterine diseases due to salt water; On the other hand, as a treatment, some of them are having their uteri removed prematurely. As a result, she loses the ability to conceive. Their tragic life story does not end there. They have to suffer from the terrible pain of various side effects. These women have to bear this pain for the rest of their lives.

The investigation also revealed that women of different ages like Rahima, Khadija, and Firoza are often victims of such 'mistreatment'. The process of removing the uterus is medically called hysterectomy. At least 75 women who have undergone this operation told us, that in all their cases the concerned 'doctor' had decided to perform a hysterectomy without considering any other treatment.

Slaughter the chicken as soon as it is caught!

Our investigation shade light on some incidents where instead of proper treatment the doctors rushed to Slaughter the chicken as soon as it is caught!

Four years back something similar happened to Firoza Begum from Boishkhali village of Shyamnagar. She had symptoms similar to Khadija. The medical technologist suggested that she has wounds in the uterus; It should be removed. After examining her reports, the village doctor suggested the same. A bewildered Firoza then got herself admitted to the upazila sadar nursing clinic with the help of a broker. Satkhira Medical College Hospital's assistant registrar Dr Kabirul Islam came to visit her one night. He decided instantly and surgically removed the uterus of a 26-year-old Firoza.

Firoza and her relatives said that Dr Kabir had never seen Firoza. Some tests were done by the clinic authority. Dr Kabir examined the reports after coming to the clinic and immediately ordered Feroza to be taken to the operation table.

A few years back, Romecha Begum (35), another woman from Firoza's house took advice from that same village doctor and went to the same nursing clinic to have her uterus removed.

On December 6 last year, Dr Kabirul Islam Kabir candidly admitted to performing surgeries many times without examining the patient or the patient's report due to a busy schedule.

He said, 'I am not the only one. Every surgeon goes through such a situation. We go to Shyamnagar once a week from Satkhira with the anaesthesia team. I may have 5-7 scheduled surgeries. Out of these, I may have one or two patients, which I have not pre-examined.'

Experts say that, if necessary, doctors can take the decision to remove the uterus; But before that, the patient needs to go through some routine treatment procedures.

Medical records and various test reports of at least ten such patients from Shyamnagar with hysterectomies were shown to three gynaecologists from Dhaka and two gynaecologists from Mymensingh Medical. Experts opined that a hysterectomy was decided without the necessary tests for all ten cases. None of the patients had symptoms that

warranted immediate hysterectomy. Rather the experts suggested that their illness could have been cured by treating them for a few more days.

All of those ten patients said that when they went to the doctor, none of them were informed about any treatment through medicines; Instead, they were told as their disease is incurable, a hysterectomy should be the choice. Then they went to a clinic recommended by that doctor or the brokers and got the surgery done. In seven out of 13 clinics in Shyamnagar, after inquiring and talking to the officials, it was found that they operated on every patient who came for a hysterectomy, and none were turned away.

The ultrasonogram report of Khadija Begum from Shyamnagar was mailed to Dr Ishrat Jahan Swarna, obstetrician, gynaecologist and surgeon of Mymensingh Medical College Hospital. She was informed that the local doctor asked to remove the uterus of this patient. The patient is asking for advice on whether or not to go for the procedure. After examining the report, Dr Swarna replied on October 13. She wrote, 'The term used in the report was not correct. Although Khadija's medical history is somewhat similar to the symptoms of PID (Pelvic Inflammatory Disease), it is not an acute condition. And the uterus of such a patient should not be removed in any way.'

Later when Dr Swarna was informed that Khadija's uterus had already been removed by the local doctors and the clinic's medical certificate mentioned her condition as PID, she replied, 'If PID is in acute condition i.e., if all the symptoms of the patient are very severe, then according to the National Guidelines for Gynecology there is also treatment through medication. Acute-level PID can be cured with antibiotics. However, the patient has to follow some rules with medicine.'

She added that there is a drug regimen for chronic conditions. If the patient still does not improve, then the option of a hysterectomy comes. But there are some protocols in that case.

She said, 'Our guidelines recommend hysterectomy for PID but that too after a lot of judgment. I find symptoms of PID in a patient and instantly I opt for a hysterectomy, that approach is not right.'

'The age of the patient is a major consideration in case of hysterectomy. If a woman under 45 years of age has her uterus and ovaries removed, the side effects can be severe.'

Similarly, Rahima Begum's pre-surgery report was sent to another doctor at Mymensingh Medical College, with the same query of whether her hysterectomy was necessary or not. Knowing the entire history of Rahima's disease, she said, 'No way. However, to know whether the patient has cervical cancer or not, a VIA (Visual Inspection of the cervix with Acetic acid) test and treatment should be started.'

Later, when informed about the actual incident, this doctor said, 'This patient's uterus should not have been removed.' The doctor requested not to be named.

A perusal of Rahima Begum's records shows that her blood groups, ultra-sonogram, haemoglobin, RBS, creatinine, and HBSAg-ICT tests were done before the operation.

Experts say that before removal of the uterus, CBC, URE, ECG tests, ultra-sonogram of the pelvic organs, TVS, and VIA must be done. As there is a possibility of a lot of bleeding in this operation, if the haemoglobin is not at least 11, it is better not to have a hysterectomy.

Rahima Begum's blood haemoglobin was 8.4. She needed five bags of blood during the operation. Both previous ultra-sonogram reports and hospital discharge papers named her condition as having a 'mild-bulky Uterus'.

A gynaecologist with experience of working in the coastal areas of the country for a long time, Dr Tasnuva Afrin is currently in Sweden. After examining Rahima's documents online, she commented, 'The patient must undergo TVS (Trans Vaginal Ultrasound) and VIA test before taking the decision to remove the uterus. There should be an investigation into why her uterus is heavy. Whether it is a tumour or not, it cannot be determined without TVS.'

She added, 'Hysterectomy can be done if the patient suffers from any uterine problems like bleeding, pain, tumour for a long time. But all these problems are treatable with medicine and should be tried. In many cases, the affected area can be surgically removed without removing the entire uterus.'

'However, if the medicine does not work at all or if the uterus is going to turn into cancer, a hysterectomy can be done. But before that, it is essential to at least check TVS and VIA. But none of the clinics in Shyamnagar in Satkhira has this practice.'

We went for comment to the Secretary General of Bangladesh Obstetrical and Gynecological Society (OGSB), Professor Dr Gulshan Ara Begum. She said, 'There are degrees of severity for PID or any type of uterine infection. A teenager can also have PID. So the decision to remove the uterus cannot be made just by an ultrasound examination.'

This inhuman treatment is only for the lust for money!

Rita Rani Pal, the assistant surgeon of Shyamnagar Upazila Health Complex, said, 'I came here two years ago and saw that the uteri of 22-23-year-old girls were removed. I felt very bad. There was no one to tell them that prolonged bleeding does not necessarily mean that the uterus should be removed and it is not right.'

She continued, "If a patient goes to a surgeon with symptoms of irregular periods due to hormonal imbalance caused by irregular intake of pills, he would suggest hysterectomy. Again, girls here have multiple children at a young age because they get married at a young age. Then many surgeons or clinic authorities remove the uterus with the argument of their family being 'complete'."

No one wants to give a direct answer to the question of why they remove the uterus so recklessly. But after analyzing the course of events, it can be understood that the lust for money is behind all this. Rahima Begum had to pay Tk 12,000 to Sundarban Apollo Hospital for a uterine operation. The cost of buying medicines was extra. In total, she had to spend about Tk 35,000 for that operation.

Khadija's husband Ibrahim said that since his wife's hysterectomy, he has spent Tk 42,000 so far. Of this, he had to pay the MRA clinic Tk 12,000. During her 11-day stay at the clinic, he had to buy medicines worth Tk 11,000. He still has to buy medicines.

Civil surgeon of Satkhira Dr Md. Hussain Shafayat also testifies to the fact that private clinics and hospitals in coastal areas like Shyamnagar look to surgery for income. He said that the clinics are actually built for commercial reasons. Most of their income comes from gynaecology and obstetrics.

He said, 'Earlier in a meeting with the clinic owners, I informally suggested that they should send all the patients in need of C-sections to Sadar Hospital. In reply, they said almost in unison that in that case more than half of the clinics will be closed.'

Officials of various clinics informed us that, they have to pay the doctors Tk 3,000 to 5,000 per uterine surgery.

As per the Civil Surgeon's office, Shyamnagar has nine Clinic/Diagnostic Centers registered and applied for registration and there are five Diagnostic Centers. However, after visiting the area and investigating various sources, it was evident that many more clinics and diagnostic centres have sprung up like fungi. Whether registered or unregistered, there was a substantial shortage of essential infrastructure, equipment and medical services.

Hafizur Rahman, head of 'Nagar' private hospital, said that 30-35 operations are performed in his clinic every month. Among them, 2-3 uterine operations are performed.

Sundarban Apollo Hospital and Diagnostic Center official Jamini Roy said that from January 17 to September 4, 12 patients underwent hysterectomies there. And in the month of October, a total of 79 people were operated, including three hysterectomies.

Considering Rahima and Khadija's expenses average, Sundarban Apollo Hospital earned about Tk 150,000 from last January 17 to September 4 just by hysterectomies. Along with this, their income from various tests of patients was also sufficient. The officials of the clinics admitted that this income would have been much higher if there was no corona epidemic.

Hafizur Rahman, head of Nagar private hospital, said, 'Only 40 patients underwent hysterectomy in 2020. Because of the Corona lockdown, only emergency operations like Caesarean are more frequent since last year.'

However, if given proper treatment, these patients would have been saved from the curse of hysterectomy. Our investigation shows that Majeda Begum Morjina (35), who had been suffering from irregular bleeding and lower abdominal pain for quite some time, was advised by a village doctor to have a hysterectomy after undergoing an ultra-sonogram. Morjina was preparing accordingly. A clinic broker was also contacted. Meanwhile, she went to Friendship Hospital in Shyamnagar on the advice of a relative.

After several tests, a doctor there prescribed 15 days of medicine to Morjina and said that there was no need for a hysterectomy under any circumstances.

When we contacted her on November 23, Morzina said that she is doing fine now.

Foreign-aided 'Friendship Hospital' in Shyamnagar is creating some good instances also. In 2020, about 400 women underwent VIA for uterine diseases. Of these, 67 were found to be at severe risk of cancer. They were referred to Khulna and Dhaka for further treatment. All others were treated well with prescription drugs. No one had to have their uterus removed.

After hearing about all these incidents, human rights activist and lawyer Salma Ali said, 'Uterus has given women unique features. However, the dishonest doctor-clinic-hospital cycle is removing the uterus of women without any medical treatment, which is a gross violation of human rights. Those who are doing these should be brought under punishment.'

Legal expert Manzil Morshed said, 'If the uterus is removed by unnecessary operation without proper treatment, it is a serious loss for a woman and an extreme disaster for womanhood. There are doctors in hundreds of clinics that have sprung up in different upazilas or rural areas of the country, who do this intentionally. Many people are also negligent. The victims can apply to BMDC (Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council) against these doctors and arrange cancellation of their license; A criminal case can also be filed.

'Aggrieved women are also entitled to compensation. But the problem is, common people, do not know so much. They do not even have the strength to fight a legal battle in the face of so much adversity. In this case, various agencies or social organizations should come forward.'

Stating that removing someone's uterus is a violation of human rights this legal expert added, 'If a woman's uterus is not damaged in such a way if expert doctors suggest that there is no need to remove it; Then a woman has the right to save her uterus just like the right to live.'

Miserable life with side effects

A procedure of hysterectomy is not always making the life of women better. Some of them told us that their lives have become miserable due to various side effects. Khadija Begum, a mother of two children, said on November 4, 'Earlier, I used to have stomach pain for a few days of the month. After the surgery, there is a burning sensation in my body all the time. There is a burning pain in the operated area. I feel like jumping into the water for some relief.'

30-year-old Firoza Begum said that she has been suffering from severe burning sensations in her head and body ever since the hysterectomy. She even does not like the company of her husband now. There is turmoil in the family all the time. Keeping her family together has become very challenging for her.

Firoza said, 'If I knew there would be such a problem, I would not have opted for the surgery.'

Mymensingh Medical's Dr Ishrat Jahan Swarna said, 'Girls have different hormones in their bodies, which regulate menstrual cycle, mood, and memory. But if the uterus is removed, the regular flow of these hormones is disrupted. If the ovary is removed along with the uterus, the source of these hormones is destroyed.

‘A young patient who was not supposed to go through her menopause, removing her uterus and ovaries will have terrible side effects. She will feel very warm and will feel like dying. She will have vaginal dryness, as a result, she will not be able to have sexual intercourse with her husband; It will be difficult. Her bones will begin to deteriorate. The overall likability decreases a lot.’

According to a 2006 article published by the US National Library of Medicine, a hysterectomy can disrupt the blood supply and function of the ovaries.

Rita Rani Pal, the assistant surgeon of Shyamnagar Upazila Health Complex, added, ‘If the uterus is removed at a young age, women continue to have problems like hot flushes (burning of hands, feet and body), and short temper.’

Almost all the patients said that after the hysterectomy, doctors advised them to take the tablet ‘Tibonor’ for the rest of their lives to reduce the burning sensation. Doctors said that this tablet is given to women for the treatment of post-menopause or menopause symptoms due to surgery.

However, most of the patients said that one file (10 tablets) of Tibonor costs about Tk 200. Is it possible for them to buy and have this medicine for the rest of their lives when scarcity is a constant companion of everyone?