

Her Healing Heritage : Local Beliefs and Practices Concerning the Health of Women and Children : A multistate study in India edited by Dr. Mira S. Compiled by Smita Bajpai. Chapter 9. Chetna Publication. March 1996. p.216.

Keeping Women Healthy After Child-Birth

After the birth, a woman's dhatus are drained, her body is loose and cool. Because of her labor, and the flow of waters and blood from her womb, her body is as if empty, in, a vacuum (translated from a shloka in Ashangu Hridaya)

Traditional care consists of numerous practices which mean to bring her back to 'rosy health and vigor' and to enable her to feed her child with sufficient nutritious milk. As the woman's health is all the more vulnerable after child-birth, practices are adopted to sustain her health.

The forty five days or one and half month after a child's birth is a period of high significance within most communities. People observe 'sutak' a pollution which afflicts family members when someone is born or dies. The family even refrains from worshipping the gods in the house-temple. The entire process of child-birth is considered a polluted affair. The family members refrain from touching the woman, the dai and helping woman during child-birth, which easily follows in to the after childbirth care.

It is a common belief that a woman has peculiar fragrance after child-birth which lures the daakin or churel (evil spirits) to hold her. Rituals such as nazar utaarna, keeping iron knife or instrument under the pillow of the woman are done to ward off the spirits. The woman is kept in isolation. No body is allowed to touch the cot. She is advised against going out, in the dark and not to speak loudly, laugh loudly, talk too much or remain sitting (she should lie down).

These practices symbolize the physical and mental vulnerability of the woman after child-birth. It is known that a woman spends all her energy in nourishing the baby in the womb and in giving birth. Therefore, immediately after birth, she is in a state of vacuum and drained of her nutritional resources, which need to be replenished by adequate diet and rest.

Biological vulnerability aside, poverty and social discrimination often do not allow women adequate rest and food, nor medical care, after childbirth. As a result unnumbered women suffer due to womb and birth-canal injury, hemorrhage, sepsis or 'child-birth fever'. Even if not fatal, these may lead to long-term illness and disability.

What to do dais and elderly woman say about woman care after child-birth?

All the eleven states sent back information about after childbirth practices as reported by the dais and elderly ladies.

Women in six states reported giving **special herbs** right after childbirth. They are womb-cleansing, strength-giving and milk-augmenting. (Table 1)

Table 1: List of herbal substances given right after child-birth

(Key: * = text-mentioned, &127; = not text-mentioned)

Herbs	State	Remarks
&127; Rabdo (a local drink)	RAJ	Effect unknown, nutritious
&127; Decoction of kulya (?)	MAH	Herb not known
&127; Soup of pab (prawn)	MAH	Not know
* Soup of chicken	MAH	Not know
* Pepper, ginger and jaggery	MAH	Nutritive, digestive
&127; Water of charura	MP	Unknown
&127; Madhu flower medicine	MAH	Details needed
* Hot tea and jaggery	MAH	Harmful, strength giving
* Decoction of upalsari (H. indicus)	MAH	Cooling, vaayyu subsiding
* Bishop-weed or dill seeds roasted in oil	GUJ, MAH	Heating, vaayyu subsiding
* Hing, ajowain blacksalt, pipali, ghee, hot	UP	Vaat-subsidings, strengthening

	milk		
*	Ghee, jaggery, oil, ginger, ani seeds, piper longum	RAJ	Nutritious heating vaayyu subsiding
*	Dill seeds, coconut, vekhanda (sweet flag), fenugreek leaves	MAH	Nutritive, vaayyu subsiding
*	Hing (asafoetida), ajowain (bishop-weed seed), methi (fenugreek) seeds, jaggery...	MP	Vaat-subsiding, strengthening
*	Kulisalavu, saalava marundu, black cumin, asafoetida, ani seeds, dry ginger, black pepper, garlic, turmeric..	TN	Heating, digestive vaayu subsiding

Women in eight states, but not Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and Orissa, said women are given special **nutritious foods** after child-birth. (Table 2) The period may be as little as three days, or it may extend as long as the child feeds at the breast or until it begins to walk. (Table 3)

Table 2: List of special foods for women after child-birth

(Key: * = text-mentioned, &127; = not text-mentioned)

Foods	State	Remarks
* Pej, dil seeds & dry cocnut	MAH	Nutritious, normalize vaayu
* Rice pej, soft cooked rice	MAH	Nutritious, normalize vaayu
* Kanji & other light foods	KER	Nutritious, easily digestible
* Ghee & jaggery more than usual	RAJ	Nutritious, normalize vaayu
* Broken wheat with oil & jaggery	MAH	Strengthening, heating
* Gruel of rice & jaggery in milk	MAH	Strengthening, heating
&127; Rava sheera, "coffee,	MAH	Sheera heavy in first few days

	bread		
&127;	Khekdyia kadhi (sour crab soup)	MAH	Nutritious, heating
&127;	Kombadi rassa (decoction of hen)	MAH	Nutritious, heating
&127;	Rice, flaked rice, banana, potato	WB	Light, nutritious
&127;	Routine light food	GUJ	Special foods are required
&127;	Daal, rice; home cooked food	BIH	Special foods are required
*	Light food 12 hours after child-birth	BIH	Give when woman is hungry
*	Rasam with garlic & palm jaggery at meals	TN	Normalizes vaayu heating
*	Turmeric roasted in ghee, boiled with jaggery & water	BIH	Strengthening, anti-septic
*	Halva of ajowain, edible gum, coriander seeds & ghee	RAJ	Nutritious, heating, normalizes vaayu
*	Gruel of maize thuli, sugar, jaggery, rice, khichadi & goat-milk	GUJ	Easy to digest, nutritious
&127;	White bread, coffee, when child-birth is in hospital	TN	Not nutritive, increase vaayu
&127;	2 days: nothing; then, badi, rice, moong daal	MP	Harmful, starving weakens, jeopardize milk production
&127;	Raw onion/garlic; dried ginger; gruel of maize/wheat (thuli) with sugar/jaggery; /rice/khichadi; goat milk	GUJ	Light digest, nutritious, milk-enhancing
&127;	For 3 days: kanke (?) or acacia water day 6:	MP	Carminative and heating, kanke, karayal are unknown

	hareera (a gruel) of rajgira & anise seeds karayal, piper longum, ginger, jaggery, coconut, ghee, etc; rice cooked with turmeric & piper longum		
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Table 3: Duration of a special diet after child-birth

(Key: 3 = women report, - = don't report, * = text-mentioned, &127; = not text-mentioned)

Number of days		B I H	G U J	K A R	K E R	M A H	M P	O R I	R A J	T N	U P	W B	T O T
*	30 (1 month)	3	3	-	-	3	-	-	-	3	-	-	4
*	45 (1 1/2 month)	-	3	-	-	-	-	3	3	3	-	-	4
&127;	120 (4 months)	-	-	-	3	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	2
&127;	180 (6 months)	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	3	-	-	-	2
&127;	21 days (3 weeks)	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	1
&127;	13-60 (2 months)	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
&127;	Breast-feeding	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
&127;	Child walks/talks (1 year)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	1
&127;	No specific days	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	2
Total		1	3	1	1	4	2	1	2	2	1	2	

In nine states, excluding Orissa and Bihar, women reported giving substances and doing some manipulations substances primarily for **womb-cleansing**. (Table 4)

Table 4: Herbs for womb-cleansing

(Key: * = text-mentioned, &127; = not text-mentioned)

Herbs	State	Remarks
* Garlic juice, or shekapai juice orally	KAR	Ushna, tikshna, stimulant
&127; Mohua liquor	UP	Ushna
&127; Soup of srumstick (Moringa oliefera)	TN	Ushna, vaatanulomak
&127; Rasam with pumpkin leaves	TN	Nutritive
&127; Indian spinach cooked with lentils	TN	Strength-giving
&127; Decoction of gorakh chincha	MAH	Not known
* Rakt rohida (Amoora rohituka) liquor	MAH	Heating
* Black pepper and asafoetida	TN	Ushna, garbhashay shodhak
* Ajowain (bishop-weed seeds) orally	MP	Ushna, stimulant
* Ghee and black pepper	UP	Ushna nutritive
* Jaggery in hot milk	UP	Ushna, nutritive

& 1 2 7 ;	Juice of arni	GUJ	Not known
& 1 2 7 ;	Neem leaf juice	GUJ	Krimighna, anti-septic
*	Decoction of dryginger & milk/water	UP	Ushna, pachak
*	Ginger and jaggery, mixed & eaten	TN	Garbhashay shodhak, digestive
*	Decoction of jaggery, ghee & ajowain	RAJ	Ushna, garbhashay shodhak
& 1 2 7 ;	Decoction of upalsari (H. indicus)	MAH	Not known
& 1 2 7 ;	A abolus of kayam (asafoetida)	TN	Tikshna, garbhashay shodhak
& 1 2 7 ;	Boil sundakai (verbacifolium species) & drink	TN	Ushna, vaatnulomak
& 1 2 7 ;	Decoction of bishopweed seed	TN	Ushna, anulomak
*	Rasam of dry ginger, palm jaggery, garlic & cumin seeds, orally.	TN	Ushna, garbhashay shodhak
*	Thin paste of turmeric, jaggery, dry coconut & chuthana (?)	UP	Ushna, nuksha anti-septic
*	Kulisalavu (preparation with black cumin, tumeric asafoetida and palm	TN	Ushna, stimulant, anti-septic

	jaggery		
*	Decoction of deo gingers, black pepper, peepali, nutmeg, bay leaf, jaggery, oil	MAH	Ushna, gardhashay shodhak
*	Turmeric roasted in ghee/oil, mixed with jaggery, water; boiled	TN	Ushna, garbhashay shodhak
*	Gruel of tuvar and wheat flour, jaggery dry coconut & dates	UP	Nutritive
& 1 2 7 ;	Lapsi (sweet gruel): ground wheat roasted in ghee, water & jaggery	MAH	Nutritious, helps milk production
& 1 2 7 ;	Kheer (milk gruel) of home-made wheat noodles & jaggery/sugar	MAH	Nutritious, helps milk production
& 1 2 7 ;	Atimanjari leaves (O. sanctum/Tulsi)	TN	Womb-cleansing prop. Not known, ushna-tikshna
*	Kaya leham of cumin, black pepper, ginger to lick	TN	Ushna vaatanulomak
& 1 2 7 ;	Raw drumstick pulp, tender coconut sugar	TN	Heating & cooling (may have neutral effect), nutritive

In all the states except Gujarat, **body massage** to the woman after child-birth is carried out varying from three days to one and a half month. (Table 5)

Table 5: Days for massage after child-birth

(Key: 3 = women report, - = don't report, * = text-mentioned, &127; = not text-mentioned)

Days		B I H	G U J	K A R	K E R	M A H	M P	O R I	R A J	T N	U P	W B	T O T
*	45-90	3	-	-	3	3	-	-	-	3	3	-	5
&127;	3-15	-	-	-	-	3	3	-	3	-	3	3	5
&127;	3-7	-	-	3	-	3	3	3	-	-	-	-	4
&127;	Not done	-	3	-	-	3	-	-	-	3	-	-	3
&127;	10-12	3	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
&127;	7-90	-	-	-	-	3	-	3	-	-	-	-	2
&127;	100	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
*	Less than 45	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	1

Vaginal fumigation after child-birth was reported by women in seven states. (Table 6)

Table 6: Number of days of rest after child-birth

(Key: 3 = women report, - = don't report, * = text-mentioned, &127; = not text-mentioned)

Days		B I H	G U J	K A R	K E R	M A H	M P	O R I	R A J	T N	U P	W B	T O T
*	45-90 days	3	3	-	3	3	-	-	3	3	3	-	7
&127;	3-15	-	3	3	-	3	3	-	-	-	3	-	5
*	30	-	-	-	-	3	-	3	-	-	-	-	2
&127;	5-8	-	-	-	-	3	3	-	3	-	-	-	3

&127;	21-30	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	1
&127;	60	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	3	2
&127;	20	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
&127;	8-10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	1
&127;	2-180	3	-	-	3	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	3

Women in all eleven states affirmed the need for rest after child-birth. The rest period varied from two days to 180 days. (Table 6)

Special herbs given right after child-birth

After child-birth, a woman is tired and weak. She needs rest and food that would provide energy in consistence with her feeble power for digestion. Traditionally apart from specific diet, special herbs and substances are given to help the woman regain her lost strength and vigor. Dais from five states provided information on herbal substances given after childbirth. Consider Table 9.1 which lists the herbs given by the dais and elderly women.

The herbal preparations given to the woman are: * liquids that are heating * strength promoting * snigdha (unctuous) * vaayu subsiding.

This is consistent with the shaastra, as it is said that after child-birth, vaayu in a woman's body is vitiated and steps to provide strength and subside vaayu should be undertaken, keeping in mind the delicacy of her health.

Special foods for women after child-birth

In most of the Indian communities, there is a tradition to give special, foods after child-birth. If a woman gives birth in the marital home, these foods are made in her maika, peehar - natal home and sent over. No family member or women who are pregnant can eat these foods as they are heat-producing and contain special 'child-birth-herbs'.

Diet and herbal substances have 'medicinal' qualities for restoring and promoting health and preventing disorders. Special herbs and foods are taken after child-birth with the specific objectives of * helping the woman regain strength * re-toning her reproductive system * increasing the production of her milk. Consider Table 9.2.

Foods that are nourishing, heating, oily/fatty and that subside vaayu are given to enable woman regain her strength.. Some of the herbs facilitate the contractions of the womb.

Most of the foods and combinations find mention in the ayurvedic texts. Tamil Nadu has more which are not text-mentioned.

The last practice, from Madhya Pradesh, of giving nothing to eat to the woman for two days is definitely harmful, and nowhere supported by the texts.

Bread and coffee after child-birth, mentioned by women in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, are obviously not to be found in the shastras.

Yeast breads are fermented and as such would tend to vitiate vaayu.

Some herbs and substances are still unknown to us, like kaanke and karaayal and, as such, they appear to be absent from the texts. More information is required about some of the other items.

The most common diet suggested by women from seven states consists of light, routine foods usually liquid or semi-solid and containing ingredients that are strengthening and vaayu-subsidizing. If affordable, ghee is used lavishly after the initial few days. In some communities, even if they cannot afford anything else, they would try to give ghee after childbirth. For some women it is the only time when she can eat ghee as it is costly and valued socially.

Frankly speaking, restricting vegetables, is an attempt to reduce the need to defecate. In most villages, women have to go out some distance, and in the darkness, difficult for a woman after giving birth.

The shastras suggest foods that are ushna (heating), bruhaneeya (nutritive) energy providing cereals and fats. They however do not specify about eating green vegetables.

The period to follow special diet: It is a common belief that women's health and digestive capacity are weak after child-birth. Efforts are made to, gradually build up her strength and stamina. So her diet and activities are regulated. The practice of eating certain foods, herbs and following a particular dietary pattern is limited to a fixed period. This is also related to the common perception of pollution after child-birth. Consider Table 9.3.

As can be seen from Table 9.3, the range of days for observing a special diet is broad - from three days to continuation of breast-feeding.

The most common period, reported by women from four states is between thirty to forty five days. However, based on the availability and the culture woman have modified the period to suit their needs.

Continuing this pattern of diet as long as the child breast-feeds, or starts walking, or for six months to one year is likely to be harmful for obvious reasons.

Womb-cleansing practices

Local practices and beliefs embrace the idea of womb-cleansing both physically and culturally. The menstrual blood is understood to get accumulated in and around the womb for nine whole months. If allowed to remain inside, this collected old blood could later on become a gaanth. So, herbs and procedures are called for that increase bleeding after child-birth. In fact, bleeding after child-birth is thought to be good for the health of the woman.

Culturally, the practice of shariar ki safai (womb-cleansing) is related to the idea of chua-chhoot, sutak (pollution).

Everything and everyone associated with childbirth gains the taint of untouchability. Usually of lowest caste, the dai herself is achhoot (untouchable) anyway. But from the onset of labor to a variable period after birth, the woman and the child and all articles and people in touch with them, and even the house-hold, are considered polluted and untouchable.

The practice of observing sutak may be helpful for isolating mother and infant to prevent illness and sepsis. But isolation of this sort must affect the emotional health and social well-being of the woman - her relations with her family, the outside community and environment, and vice-versa.

Our friends who collected the data and the friendly dais suggested practices to clean the genitals and to cleanse the womb.

In West Bengal and Kerala, a 'wash with warm water' was suggested to clean the clots.

In Maharashtra, they reported cleaning the genitals with water and soap, or with deshi daru (liquor) and the woman is asked to drink some of it.

Physical methods for womb-cleansing: Applying pressure over womb or using heat are commonly used practices for womb-cleansing.

In Kerala, dais reported of massaging the belly.

In West Bengal, a woman is asked to squat over glowing charcoals.

In Uttar Pradesh, a woman squats over glowing charcoal on which bishop - weed seeds and asafoetida are thrown.

These practices stimulate the womb, are heating and may prevent sepsis.

Women from nine states except Orissa and Bihar reported herbs for cleansing the womb. Women in Tamil Nadu alone listed seven herbal decoctions to drink for womb-cleansing, of which six are found in the texts. They also told of remedies to dean the genital parts, most of which find mention in ayurveda.

Out of the 32 **herbal preparations** reported by women, seven are not known to have the properties to cleanse the womb, according to the ayurvedic texts. Among these, some herbal preparations are nutritive and promote strength. None of the decoctions to be consumed after child-birth appear to be harmful, according to the vaidyas.

Belly-massage is a practice reported by dais from Kerala, useful to create pressure on the womb and mechanically cleanse the womb. This practice is also mentioned in the shastras. If done with pressure, it also improves the muscle tone, helps the womb regain its original position, relieves pain and subsides vaayu.

Vaginal fumigation is a practice reported by the dais from Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal, which is also mentioned in the shastras for stimulating the womb and subsiding vaayu.

Body massage practices

Whenever one is very tired, a good massage is soothing and encouraging, and especially so after child-birth. Traditional body massage * subsides vaayu, * improves muscle and skin tone * gives strength and • enhances stamina. * it also relaxes. No wonder women include it as part of a woman's care after childbirth!

Usually the dai or a massage woman gives a massage and bath to the woman and the new born. Early in the morning, she asks the woman to wear some old saree (which she may take home later on), and lie on a cloth spread on the ground. Then she starts the massage by slowly rubbing oil on the legs, then hands, back and the whole body. A special belly massage, with pressure, allows the accumulated kachra (dirt) in the womb to come out is done at the end. Special areas for massage other than belly are calf and lower back. She may chat pleasantly through out. A hot water bath, followed with dhooni (fumigation), completes the shek (fomentation).

Women in ten states except Gujarat reported of a body massage after child-birth. A few women from Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra said that in their community massage is not given to a woman after child-birth.

Most commonly, women advise continuing body massage for three to fifteen days, or forty-five to ninety days. The number of days for continuing massage could depend on the economic condition, availability of other person to look after the house, availability of the massager and the attitude of the family members towards the woman. In certain families, they may be caring enough to do this basic rite for woman and in others they may remain unperturbed. The shastras advice it to be continued for a month.

Fumigation and fomentation (Dhooni, Dhoopa, Sekai)

Literally, yoni dhoopan means exposing the vulva to heat and smoke from glowing coals and burning herbs. It is supposed to relieve soreness and protect the vulva from sepsis and strengthen the muscles and genital tissues.

Women also apply heat and herbal substances as sekai (wet and dry hot fomentation) through decoctions, a heated cloth pad or otherwise.

In seven states women said they expose the vulva to dhooni or dhoop or otherwise provide sekai to the genital area after child-birth. They say that this helps to subside vaayu after childbirth to strengthen the vaginal muscles and to improve muscle tone and prevent womb prolapse.

Women in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan throw ajowain seeds (*Carum caudatum*) over burning coals.

Smoke, of garlic peels is good, say women in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, where they also burn the chaff from cleaning dill or coriander seeds as well.

In Bihar women wash the vulva with a warm decoction of neem leaves.

In Tamil Nadu garlic peels, neem bark, incense, nirgundi, pergam are used both for fumigation and fomentation or women fumigate the vulva with a mixture of neem leaves, incense, gum of guggulu (*Commiphora mukul*), turmeric powder, donkey dung, leather and snake-skin.

In northern India, the most common herb used to fumigate the vulva after child-birth is ajowain seeds of bishol-weed (*Carum caudatum*).

Out of eight different combinations of ingredients used for fumigation and fomentation, the following three are not mentioned in the texts:

In Maharashtra, use of vekhand (*Acorus calamus* or sweet flag), and application of heat to the vulva by warm moist cloth or dry cloth;

In Karnataka, application of heat or hot oil to the sore parts.

The shastras attribute a number of benefits to yoni dhoopan. Most importantly, * prevent or lessen genital pain * reduce excessive bleeding, and * help stabilise heat in the body.

Period of rest after child-birth

Rest is crucial to recuperate after child-birth, not only for relief from exhaustion and depletion, but also for the womb to return to its former state. Yet, rest may not always be possible.

Women from all eleven states said enough rest was needed after childbirth. When they spoke of it, they tended to mix the ideal and the actual period of rest. The range was large, from a minimum of three days to a maximum of about six months - an unlikely dream. Despite their awareness, women are not in a position to demand rest. The period of rest will depend on the economic status of the family. It may also be influenced by the sex of the newborn and the woman's position in the household.

Women from Maharashtra said emphatically:

The poorer the woman, lesser the rest-period after child-birth!

In Rajasthan, other persons being there to do the household chores determines the rest-period. That help is rarely available, so women get only about eight to ten days' rest after child-birth.

The shastras say that a woman must rest for thirty to forty five days after child-birth.

What do shastras say about care after child-birth?

The ayurvedic texts specify observance of diet regimen and other cautions of conduct for a period of forty five days in normal conditions and up to three months if any complication arises.

The digestive power (paachak-agni) of a woman is weak after childbirth. She requires a light carminative, nutritious and liquid diet. This contrasts with the sweet, heavy and oily diet called for in pregnancy. For the first five days, the woman should consume.

rice kaanji (rice gruel, thick liquid drained from boiled rice) with milk medicated with herbs like laghu panchmoola (a group of light and digestive herbs: chavya, chitrak, pippali, pippaii mool & shunthi).

Her diet should be stepped up gradually, from liquid to semi-solid to solid by the tenth day. Before the tenth day, the diet should include:

* rice * soup of moong * kulattha * mutton - soup * barley * fruits • ghee * vegetables like pumpkin * carrots * cucumber. She should always drink lukewarm water for digestion and heat.

After ten days, her diet should include: *rice * ghee * jaggery * kheer (milk pudding) of khaskhas (poppy seeds) * laddu (sweet balls) made with musali (Asparagus ascendens), ajowain (bishop - weed seeds) * methi (fenugreek) seeds, shataavari root (Asparagus racemosus) and sathawa a herb. After around one month or so, the woman should gradually return to her routine diet. During this period, the shastras emphasize on rest and practices such as body massage, vaginal fumigation and abdominal support which help a woman's body to regain its strength and vigor.

Women care after child-birth...

The importance of appropriate care after childbirth is obvious to women in communities.

The period of forty five days after childbirth has a high significance in the traditional care. Emphasis is on practices that would enable strength giving foods in appropriate quantity, rest and preventive and promotive practices such as massage and fumigation. The traditional knowledge about diet, special herbs and procedures is excellent. However, most women do not get enough of either food or rest after child-birth. The first reason is poverty. Gender discrimination is the second.

Giving **massage** to one who is exhausted after child-birth gives her relaxation and relief, and typically embodies the woman-to-woman healing touch. **Vulval fumigation** helps

to -prevent sepsis and gives heat so badly needed at this time of drained energy. **Special foods and herbs** help to regain her energy as well as the proper shape of the body.

Although from a health point of view these practices are very useful, one must consider the attitude of the community towards the woman after childbirth, powerless and polluted. This attitude, in addition to many other factors accounts for the low self image of women through-out their lives.