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ASIAN STILLBIRTHS VIS-À-VIS BLEACHING CREAM TOXICITY: COLORISM AS CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK EXPLANATION

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Abstract

Colorism as suggested by social science is a veiled construct less acknowledged in the Social Work curriculum and the Social Work literature. The objective of colorism directs Asian women to engage in efforts that they may acquire by artificial means access to having light skin. Such access is facilitated by application of toxic bleaching cream ingredients which include mercury, arsenic and hydroquinone. According to empirical investigations said ingredients factor in events of stillbirth colorism. Light-skinned Asian women are less susceptible to such stillbirth events attributed to their inherent complexions. The continual use of toxic bleaching creams may be an explanation of the 33 1/3% of global stillbirths unresolved. As pertains to Asian countries in general India, Pakistan, and China significantly account for nearly 50% of all the stillbirths globally. The acknowledgement of colorism in the context of Asian women experiencing stillbirth must be addressed by unveiling the stillbirth crisis.

Keywords*: Asian; Stillbirth; Dark skin; Health risks*

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INTRODUCTION

Stillbirths and miscarriages are the rationalized culprit in the assessment of death as pertains to an unborn fetus. However, in consideration of unborn fetuses, which die prior to 20 weeks of gestation are defined as miscarriages. Fetuses that die in excess of 20 weeks of gestation before being expelled from the mother's womb are defined as

stillbirth (Star Legacy Foundation, 2021). The explanation of a cause relative to stillbirth may vary extensively. As a result, many stillbirth events remain completely unresolved. Therefore, approximately 33 1/3% of all stillbirth events occur for inexplicable reasons. This necessitates that health care providers including Social Workers and other human service personnel provide an explanation. Alternatively, those stillbirth events given to an explanation account for 66 2/3% of stillbirths. They may be assessed as the result of placental or umbilical cord complications, high blood pressure, birth defects, infections, or simply poor eating as in poor health habits. Such explanations are not local but relevant globally and via colorism pertain to the various Asian demographic populations in toto (Murphy & Botting, 1989).

Colorism as suggested by social science is a veiled construct less acknowledged in the Social Work literature. Simultaneously, it is a significant quality of life variable as pertains to women of color attributed to relative dark skin (Marira & Mitra, 2013). The publication of Social Work journals such as Affilia and Arete dedicated to issues confronting women have failed women of color including Asian who confront challenges from stillbirth colorism. As documented by the Social Service Abstracts database between 1997 and 2021 merely 25 peer-reviewed papers have been archived in Social Work journals that pertain to stillbirth colorism. Therefore, Social Service Abstracts as extension of the Social Work academy documented 1.04 peer-reviewed papers per year on the topic for more than two decades.

Due to colorism, efforts to acquire light skin by application of bleaching creams, dark-skinned women of color including Asian may precede and/or encourage behaviors that expose them to childbirth risks. These birth risks do not threaten light-skinned women to the same extent given that their light skin is the preferred ideal where bleaching creams are less necessary. An investigation of this differentiation may provide a formidable explanation of the 33 1/3% of global stillbirths needing clarification. In an effort to resolve and explain the stillbirth differentiations between light- and dark-skinned Asian mothers globally is the current objective herein. Therefore, dedicated to an informed public pertaining to such matters and advancing Social Work's practice technology, will be carried forward in the following: (a) Asia's obsession with light skin; (b) Asian use of bleaching creams; (c) bleaching cream toxicity; and (d) bleaching cream stillbirths.

Asia's Obsession with Light Skin

Asia's obsession with light skin is reported to predate contact with light-skinned Europeans who eventually had significant impact upon the skin color ideals of Asian nations. In fact, the obsession with light skin in Asia extend as far back as the 12th century. Subsequently, light skin in Asia was idealized long before Europeans had reached Asian shores (Wagatsuma, 1968). Demonstrated by such Asian countries as Japan, the belief that light skin is superior to dark skin may derive from what is suggested by skin color of the ruling classes. Light skin was associated with the privileged and by default dark skin with the peasant classes. Therefore, upon observation dark skin as less than ideal was attributed to the fact that peasants acquired dark skin because they labored under intense heat and sunlight after working outdoors. The more privileged sustained lighter complexions because they labored under less hostile working conditions if they worked at all. Under the circumstances, dark skin in Asia was denigrated. What's more, Asian women characterized by light skin suggested evidence of refinement, purity and feminine beauty (Apuke, 2018). Further evidence of Asian obsession with light skin is not limited to Asian women exclusively but empirically evident in their ideal male marital prospects suggested by eurogamy.

Asian populations are notorious worldwide for endogamous marital patterns. Endogamy refers to the traditional selection of marital partners from within the native racial or ethnic group. The reverse is exogamy, which

pertains to the selection of potential mates external to the racial or ethnic group. Eurogamy is a version of exogamy exclusive to potential mates of European—light-skinned—descent. It is a widely understood but previously undocumented aspect of the Asian social environment. Eurogamy is also a manifestation of dominant group ideals manifested in the idealization of light skin (Banton, 1996). Empirical evidence of eurogamy can be gleaned by reference to the "mail order bride" industry popular with aspiring nuptials.

In an attempt to illustrate Asian obsession with light skin Hall (2001) requested random samples of a mail order magazine in brief for years 1991-2000 (one issue for each year). Asian subjects consisted of approximately 620 marriage-minded girls ages 18 to 30 years. These Asian women included Filipinas, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Indonesian, Malaysian and "other" to accommodate an occasional Russian participant, etc. Of those Asian women who made reference to race, the obsession with light skin prevailed in that approximately 96% requested Caucasian men, 2% requested Asian men and 2% requested Latino men. The most Caucasian select of the Asian women were by far Chinese (30%), Japanese (27%) and Korean (14%). This would concur with the reputation of such groups as culturally inclined to human ranking by skin color hierarchy. The magazines purchased by men looking for mates politely advised that if black, inform an aspiring female early on in correspondence and treat it as a handicap (Hall, 2001).

The Asian obsession with light skin is not limited to empirical investigation but extends to pop culture and folklore. Considering a thin guise of fiction, the skin color issue as pertains to the Asian community was captured in cinema by "Mississippi Masala" (Anderson, 1993). This cinematic portrayal exhibited before its audience in 1992 a modern-day reality thousands of years in the making. Appearing as an anomaly of the Hindu caste system, the lowest within the Indian-Asian community discriminate against persons having dark skin. This would ordinarily be the grist of black comedy were it not so tragic. In "Mississippi Masala", an intense and physically characteristic Southern African-American male, is played by African-American actor Denzell Washington. Washington is romantically involved with an Indian-Asian woman whose family vehemently objects. Their concern is for his relative dark skin. The director of this film is Mira Nair, who is a native woman of India. She maintains a commanding view of present-day intricacies of caste and color. She exposes the dynamic ways in which skin color socially interacts to shape the lives of East Indians. Non-Indians are little aware of dark skin as per Hindu caste, but in fact at any given level, color and caste in Indian society are coordinated with those at the top--privileged and light-skinned--while those at the bottom are destitute, very dark-skinned, and much discriminated against (Hall, 2003). As compensation, and an attempt to acquire light skin, dark-skinned Asians resort to the use of bleaching creams.

Asian Use of Bleaching Creams

Asians' use of bleaching creams can be verified both empirically and anecdotally. By empirical consideration the use of bleaching creams in the Philippines is not irrelevant to its colonial history. Once colonized by light-skinned Spanish Europeans, Filipinos were compelled to whiten their dark skin. Arnado (2021) investigated the use of bleaching creams by introducing the concept of Filipino "cultural whitening." She then examined the impact of skin lightening on social mobility and differentiation. It was determined that such a contribution to the literature on Asians' racialized identities was significant. It revealed the detailed processes on post-coloniality, migration, and whitening. Extended from Pierre Bourdieu (1986), Arnado (2021) as pertains to cultural capital contends that the bleaching of skin embodied, objectified and institutionalized states of mind. Empirical evidence was collected from an ethnographic study pertaining to the lived experiences of Filipino wives married to white men. Subsequently Filipino wives encounter various degrees and contexts of cultural whitening per social mobility. Their

cultural whitening is a complicated process involving differentiation from traditional Filipino norms to associate with whiteness. On occasion, with some exception this inspired a compulsive desire to become white. Ultimately, Arnado (2021) suggest that the institutionalization of skin bleaching among Filipinos allows light skin and whiteness to become a norm thereby altering the constitution of what "Filipino" is (Arnado, 2021).

Other empirical studies have contributed to the use of bleaching creams to attain light skin by those of Asian descent. Their preference for light skin also extends to white features such as hair texture. According to Harper and Choma (2019) via self-objectification, women of color are confronted by negative outcomes, negative thoughts and pathological feelings as pertains to body features. In the aftermath may lead to dangerous behaviors such as skin bleaching. Scientific researchers investigated the associations between internalization of white beauty standards and dissatisfaction with self. This was manifested by Asian women in use of cosmetic products designed to accommodate white beauty standards. Participants included 168 Indian-Asian women residing in India. Conclusions suggest that internalization of white ideals was associated with skin bleaching. Conclusions also suggest that the aforementioned associations were indirectly allied with skin tone. Investigators contend that self-objectification theory reveals the existence of racialized beauty standards. The resolution of this problem will require a challenge to white beauty standards as the ideal. The diversification of ideals that include women of color will be critical in solving the use of skin bleaching as a stillbirth problem (Harper & Choma, 2019).

The Asian use of skin bleaching i.e.: lightening agents in China has been an historical tradition for centuries. Qian-wang-hong-bai-san (QW) is a traditional Chinese herbal formula. It has long been used as a skin whitening agent by members of the Chinese community who idealize light skin. Tsang, Ye, Tai, Gui-Xin, Leung, and et al. (2012) identified QW as an effective tyrosinase inhibitor. Their aim was to investigate the anti-melanogenic effect of QW in B16 cells. The cytotoxicity of QW in the B16 cell line was assessed. What's more cellular tyrosinase activity was measured considering melanin content (skin color). It was determined using a spectrophotometer, which measured the reflection of light off of human skin. Results proved that QW decreased melanin content. This would allow for the acquisition of light skin from dark. Hence, QW is an effective skin bleaching agent that has been an historical tradition for many years in ancient China's past (Tsang, Ye, Tai, Gui-Xin, Leung, & et al., 2012).

In addition to empirical evidence, anecdotally, Asian women of color in India and Pakistan approximate their preference for light skin via routine applications in the use of bleaching creams. The implications for quality of life in such countries are brought by bleaching creams to dark-skinned women otherwise inaccessible. Among Asian women in preparation for marriage, those characterized by a dark complexion have an opportunity to maximize their feminine appeal if they bleach. Subsequently, they resort to whatever extent necessary to attain light skin (IRIN, 2004). This is so despite the fact that bleaching creams are known to contain toxic substances that pose health risks for expectant mothers. Therefore, a Pakistani nongovernmental agency reported that as per local skin care businesses operating for profit that at least 50% of active bleaching cream clientele have sought available means such as bleaching creams to attain light skin. The extent of preference for light skin in Pakistan is such that the bleach cream industry may employ a multitude of personnel at any given point in time. In the aftermath, the local governmental authorities conduct various workshops at nearby colleges. Their purpose is to help build the self-esteem of Asian women who may suffer in their attempts to alter their complexions.

Asian women of color in Pakistan idealize light skin carried out by their use of bleaching creams referenced by anecdote in addition to empirical evidence. One such anecdote by example involves a well-educated 23-year-

old named Nasim Jamil (IRIN, 2004). Although she is young and attractive, she is dissatisfied with the way she looks. "I am not fair enough," she commented during an interview with a local news organization. She further contends that "White is best. When you ask Pakistani ladies what their [opinion] of an ideal woman is, they will tell you that she should have fair skin." As women who are located in an Islamic country, they are expected to look their best without exception while simultaneously required to be subservient to men (IRIN, 2004).

Light skin is considered an asset in India," says Rachna Gupta who is a 38-year-old part-time interior designer (Leistikow, 2003). To acquire it about once a month, she visits her local beauty salon situated in south Delhi for an application of the commercial Jolen Creme Bleach. As per marketing the package states to purchasers that it "lightens excess dark hair" but Rachna has it applied to her face to acquire the much-desired light skin. "It's not good for the skin," she insists, "but I still get it done because I am on the darker side and it makes me feel nice. Aesthetically, it looks nice" (Leistikow, 2003). Her perspective is a dominant factor precipitating Asian stillbirth events among those exposed to bleaching cream toxicity.

Bleaching Cream Toxicity

Bleaching cream toxicity is brought by substances proven harmful to an unborn fetus. Subsequently these substances perform a critical function in stillbirth events. Among the most common of toxic substances are mercury, arsenic and hydroquinone. In the commercial markets mercury may be designated by such terms as calomel, mercuric, mercurous, or mercuriom. Mercury in the chemistry discipline is notated by the chemical symbol Hg. According to Greek translation, mercury is reference to hydrargyrum which means “liquid silver.” The “liquid silver” designation was inspired by mercury’s shiny, metallic appearance. Mercury is also referred to as “quicksilver” due to its active mobility. That quality associated mercury with the fastest moving planet in the earth’s solar system. Unfortunately, the existence of mercury used as a bleaching cream ingredient contributes to stillbirth events otherwise unnecessary. Its toxic qualities may be consumed when ingested by breaks in the skin, lung ingestion via inhalation or oral consumption. Ingesting of mercury by women when pregnant in addition to stillbirths may damage their nerves and their kidneys.

Arsenic is a natural element of the environment contained in water, air, food, and soil. It is also contained in cosmetic products such as eye shadows, lotions and lipsticks. According to manufacturers, arsenic may be present in bleaching creams due to the raw materials used in the manufacturing of the creams. Subsequently, is contamination however unintended from the metal machinery used in the manufacturing process (Reay, 1972). As for lower levels tolerated over time, its toxicity may negatively impact skin, liver and kidneys. Additionally, arsenic under the same circumstances may cause a reduction in red and white blood cells, which can precipitate fatigue and an increased risk of infections all of which may facilitate stillbirths (Jordaan & Van Nickerk, 1991).

Among the most common of toxic substances contained in bleaching creams is hydroquinone. Unlike the natural arsenic and mercury, hydroquinone is a chemical manufactured commercially for specific use in bleaching creams. Its chemical formula reference is C6H4(OH)2. In addition to its use by Asian women of color who desire lighter skin hydroquinone in bleaching creams may be used by whites to eliminate “freckles”, “age spots”, and “liver spots.” The health risks of hydroquinone are attributed to its designation as a carcinogen linked to cancer. Legal bleaching creams are limited by law to a maximum of two percent of the product. Hydroquinone can also cause “ochronosis.” Ochronosis is a condition of the skin identified by its thickening and discoloration (WebMD, 2017).

Mercury, arsenic and hydroquinone are commonly noted as toxic agents contained in bleaching creams. Newly emerged is a substance most popular in the Asian nation of the Philippines called glutathione. Glutathione is an antioxidant, thus otherwise a contributor to human health. The process by which glutathione can facilitate lighter skin is known as tyrosinase activity. Glutathione can prevail in tyrosinase activity of the skin that prevents the melanin from synthesizing natural sunlight whereby the skin becomes darker. This substance has become a major health risk for its potential adverse sequelae. In India and the Philippines glutathione injections are prescribed for various alcoholic liver diseases and in the Philippines for adjunctive treatment in cisplatin chemotherapy. The FDA has not approved its use for skin lightening (Sonthalia et al., 2018). As oral, topical, and intravenous ingestions of glutathione have grown in popularity no known safe dose exists (Sonthalia et al., 2018). While no known stillbirth studies make reference to glutathione directly, it has been associated with hepatic, neurologic, and renal toxicity, Stevens Johnson Syndrome, and air emboli (Dadzie, 2016). As per totality of the aforementioned toxic substances contained in bleaching creams used by Asian women, the use of bleaching creams leading to stillbirths is a plausible prognosis.

Bleaching Cream Stillbirths

According to Thakur, Prinja, Singh, Rajwanshi, and Prasad, et al. (2010) health status is impacted by substances contained in the environment. Mercury may be introduced into the body in various ways including drinking water not irrelevant to bleaching creams. In agricultural areas where Indian populations reside heavy metals and pesticides may permeate the local environment. Investigators contend that this may be an especial risk where reproductive and child health outcomes are concerned. In reference to the current investigation a cross-sectional community-based survey was conducted. Subjects consisted of 1904 Indian-Asian women in a reproductive age group. They were joined by 1762 children below the age of 12 years who resided in 35 villages in three districts of Punjab. All were interviewed on a semi-structured schedule in reference to systemic and general health morbidities. Attending physicians administered a clinical examination and review of records when it was relevant to do so. Considering the 35 sampled villages, 25 served as the exposed group and 10 as the less exposed group. Food and water samples were tested for heavy metals and pesticides. According to results: spontaneous abortions were 20.6 per 1000 live births and premature births were 6.7 per 1000 live births. These results were significantly higher for areas impacted by heavy metal and pesticide pollution at $p<0.05$ (level of significance). What's more stillbirths were found to be approximately five times higher as compared to a meta-analysis for South Asian countries. As per toxic substances more children in the select locations also reported delayed milestones including language delay, blue line in the gums, mottling of teeth and gastrointestinal morbidities ($p<0.05$). The mercury contained in many bleaching creams was measured in excess of permissible limits (MPL) at 84.4%. Additionally, heptachlor, chlorpyriphos, β-endosulfan, dimethoate and aldrin were measured at more than MPL in 23.9%, 21.7%, 19.6%, 6.5% and 6.5% according to the ground water that was sampled. Investigators could not substantiate a direct association of heavy metals such as mercury with stillbirths. However, they were confident that it could have adverse reproductive outcomes (Thakur, Prinja, Singh, Rajwanshi, Prasad, et al., 2010).

Yoon-Jae and Jong-Min (2015) investigated the toxic substance of arsenic found in bleaching creams. Arsenic is a global substance that contributes to global health problems for Asian women worldwide due to its status as a carcinogen. Most arsenic is found in drinking water which suggests that those who bleach their skin by use of bleaching creams receive an excess of toxicity compared to populations that do not. Health risks brought by arsenic include increased dangers for various cancers such as skin, lung, bladder, and liver cancer. Non-cancer diseases may include gastrointestinal and cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and neurologic and cognitive problems. The most recent scientific investigations suggest that arsenic found in bleaching creams may also have an adverse

impact upon the reproductive system. Subsequently, arsenic may lead to adverse pregnancy outcomes. By specific accounts bleaching cream has potential to induce premature delivery, spontaneous abortion, and stillbirth otherwise unnecessary absent arsenic toxicity. Investigators contend that these toxic effects of arsenic may depend on dose, route consumed and gestation periods of arsenic exposure. Therefore, expectant Asian mothers exposed to arsenic under normal circumstances such as drinking water or food may survive toxic risks. Those who are exposed to arsenic by the addition of bleaching creams subject themselves to an increased likelihood of stillbirth events (Yoon-Jae & Jong-Min, 2015).

As relates to stillbirths globally by select accounts 50% of the total are located in Asian countries. According to said total is an inequitable distribution across said select Asian nationalities. Subsequently, there are 26 stillbirths per 1000 live births located in South Asia. In East Asia, there is a reported 7 stillbirths per 1000 live births (Lawn, Blencowe, Waiswa, Amouzou, & et al, 2016). Such a broad differentiation further necessitates an explanation. Unfortunately, despite reference to high rates of stillbirths in South Asia, there does not exist a scientific strategy that will enable a viable causal clarification.

As reported by a number of United Nations agencies in 2019, there were 1.9 million total stillbirth events globally. Considering the 1.9 million total events, 0.34 were attributed to Indian-Asian mothers. This established India by particular account as the Asian country with the largest statistical burden reported. As pertains to Asian countries in general India, Pakistan, and China accounted for nearly 50% of all the stillbirths globally for a given year when combined with the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ethiopia (Kiran, 2020). What these nationalities have in common is colorism. Colorism accounts for global bleaching cream usage that necessitate Asian women of color lighten their skin.

CONCLUSION

For various cultural and historical reasons Asian populations display an obsession with light skin. Much of that obsession may be attributed to ethnocentric tendencies indicative of racial and ethnic groups in general (Yee, 2020). The endogamous marital patterns and limited contact with the "outside world" such as the "Great Wall" provided reduced interaction experience for Asian populations confronted by alien sources. Subsequently via normal ethnocentrism they were left to demonize others by significant variations in skin color and other visible physiological traits especially if they differed from their own. The end result of these circumstances precipitated colorism.

In succinct definition, colorism pertains to an immoral transgression not irrelevant to Asian stillbirth events. Although it has existed over an extended period of time, documentation of colorism in Social Work and other scholarly literature is assumed little more than a recent social phenomenon. However, the origin of colorism was first credited to the literary icon Ms. Alice Walker. Walker made reference to colorism in 1982 and in the following year, 1983 published a second reference in Essence magazine (Webb, 2019). Said references described colorism as a social phenomenon that operates not on the basis of race, but on the basis of skin color by which race might be assumed. While colorism is critically associated with Europe and its notion of white supremacy, Asian origins of colorism precede Western contact. The eventual contact of Asians with the West merely exacerbated what had historically been an Asian tradition (Wagatsuma, 1968).

The health risks associated with bleaching creams brought by colorism include both physical and mental (Austin, 2014). Asian women of color via dark skin are at a decided disadvantage in comparison to dark-skinned men. In many Asian cultures women are valued for their physical attributes and men for their wealth, power and status (Hunter, 2002). This provides options for dark-skinned Asian men who may acquire prestige in societal worth that dark-skinned Asian women do not have. In an effort to maximize their prestige and societal worth, Asian women seeking lighter complexions resort to bleaching their dark skin in an effort to attain the light skin ideal. They do so despite toxic substances such as mercury, arsenic and hydroquinone contained in bleaching cream products. The end results are unnecessarily high stillbirth rates and other health challenges. To reverse this trend will require public education and diversification of global beauty standards. Social Work practitioners and similar health care professionals must then incorporate colorism into their academic curriculums and similar critical content requirements.

The incorporation of colorism will best serve Asian women, Social Work, and the general public by informing them as to the toxicity of bleaching cream ingredients. Cigarettes and other health risking products in many locations are required by law to label and otherwise inform those who purchase. Social Work practitioners via limited literature cannot effectively address stillbirth colorism events if they do not know personally or professionally the implications of skin bleaching per toxic substances. Said substances are contained in seemingly harmless "over-the-counter" bleaching cream products. Being informed as to the potent toxicity of bleaching cream products may prove invaluable for the 33 1/3% of stillbirth events that have escaped explanation.

Social Work practitioners and other human service agencies have proven inadequate in their efforts to determine the sociocultural factors and more importantly explanation of 33 1/3% of stillbirth events pertaining to Asian and other women of color. Therefore, Social Work and other human service providers must assume the task of assessing the perspective of parents and the community. Consideration given to Asian sociocultural practices and health system-related factors that enable stillbirths is a viable point for initiation of a plausible investigation (Zakar, Zakar & Mustafa, 2018).

Here colorism and the application of bleaching creams might play a pivotal role. As per investigation, Asian countries around the globe are bound culturally and socially to the internalized idealization of light skin which inspires bleaching cream usage (Sahay & Piran, 1997). Said usage is irrelevant to standard Social Work operations and thus more apt to trivialization. By challenging the Eurocentric standards of the academy at-large will provide academic spaces for content such as colorism previously ignored. Its incorporation may provide a viable alternative explanation of the 33 1/3% stillbirth events currently unknown.

As esteemed members of a diverse profession, Social Workers and the Social Work academy at-large, must be held to a higher standard of social justice and social activism (Lymbery, Butler & parton, 2005). Indeed, its ability to acquire community sanction is brought by social justice activism and professional integrity. The acknowledgement of colorism in the context of Asian women experiencing stillbirth must be addressed via social justice by unveiling the stillbirth crisis. The ability of the Social Work profession to advance the evolution of social justice in society is the inherent responsibility of workers. That being so, discouraging the exclusive idealization of light skin will be rendered all but virtually inevitable. Confronting it is then the only viable social justice strategy for problem solving the current Asian stillbirth crisis.

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